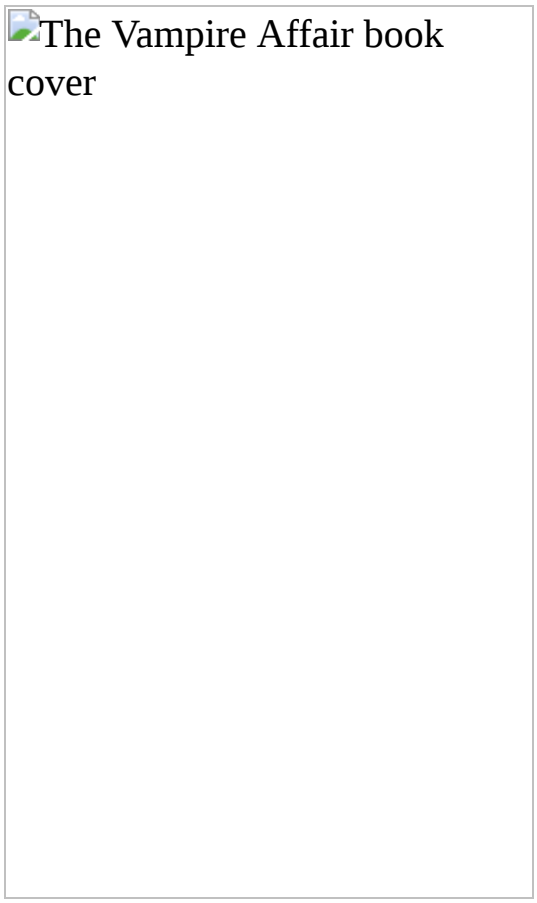

The Vampire Affair

By David McDaniel

The body had been drained of blood....

In a remote area of the Transylvanian Alps, an U.N.C.L.E. agent had been killed in mysterious circumstances. The man's footprints in the snow led up to the base of the tree where he had been killed, but there were no pursuing tracks, no clues at all as to what doom had overtaken him.

There were only the two small holes in the neck, and a complete absence of blood.

Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin didn't believe in vampires—but as they investigated their fellow-agent's death they were forced again and again to wonder if perhaps the old terrors of the region had more reality than the world would like to think....

THE VAMPIRE AFFAIR

It had begun to snow. The bare black branches of the trees clutched at the lowering white sky with bony fingers, and the dark earth was flecked with bright patches like a leprous mold. The sparsely scattered pines spread impenetrable shadows in the dimness, and the wind whispered rumors of ancient and instinctive fear among their hissing needles. The rustling of air seemed to be the distant voices of spirits of the darkness, filling the forest silences with an undercurrent of unease. Nothing moved in the cold stillness except the textured white blanket above and the softly falling flakes.

Then a sound began, very faintly. It was a quick soft thudding of feet on dirt, like the beating of an overstrained heart. There was a slight irregularity to its rhythm, and an occasional cracking of a twig. As it grew, a figure appeared between the trees—a figure running, stumbling as though exhausted, and finally stopping, slumping against a pine trunk.

As the footsteps ceased, wheezing gasps sounded loud as he fought to draw air into his straining lungs. His coat was open despite the cold, and his tie was loose. Sweat poured down his face and ran down his neck, where the large vein pulsed violently from his exertion. His chest ached, and his legs were stiff and numb.

He couldn't remember how long he had been running. But he knew he wouldn't be running much longer. The weakness of total fatigue was spreading through his system like a slow poison, and his muscles were beginning to stiffen up as he stopped in the cold trying to regain his breath. The icy night air burned in his dry throat.

He managed to hold his breath for a few seconds, and listened hard. There was only silence, except for the pounding of his heart. Then he heard it. Gusts of wind began to whip the trees, and a rustling sounded behind him as of a large body forcing its way through the brush. There were other noises coming towards him—not fast, but never stopping.

He pushed the pine tree away, and balanced himself on his feet. He had to run—to keep running. His mind refused to think of what would happen if he stopped, or fell, or slowed, and was caught.

Something was after him in the darkness—more than one thing. He didn't know what they were. His mind supplied formless horrors with fangs and claws, and his body fled through the darkness from them.

Now he could hear them, closer behind them. The wind was whipping around him now—a strange directionless wind that caught up the snow and dried pine needles and whirled them about him, clutched at him and tugged at his clothes. And over the wind he could hear soft running footsteps keeping pace with his own, and animal pantings behind him and to the sides.

The wind grew, and the trees around him writhed with it. On he ran, leaden legs sinking into the soft earth of the forest floor, chest bursting for air. He knew they were close behind him now, and the flesh of his back tensed and

crawled, expecting the impact of the deadly pursuers and the tearing pain of razor teeth.

He had thought he had escaped them once. He had stopped to rest against a pine tree, for a blessed moment of release from the endless flight, and a few seconds to catch his breath, but then they had been after him again. Were they playing him? Were they going to run him until he collapsed and begged for death, or until he could see the lights of the village and sanctuary? Would they harry him until he was almost on the steps of the church and then strike him down on the brink of safety?

If only he could save a wisp of strength, an atom of energy, held out for a final spurt that could put him beyond their reach—then there might be a chance. He could never give up hope; if he did, he might just as well lie down in the dirt and die now.

But there were a few shots left in his gun, and unless his hunters were creatures of the supernatural he could at least die fighting.

Still he fled, his feet landing hard now, every step jarring his whole frame. His arms flapped limply as he ran, and his steps were wider spaced as he staggered slightly. Trees appeared in his path as looming black shadows, and he swerved to avoid them. Would he ever see the lights of the village? He could have been running in a circle, for all he knew—there was neither moon nor stars in the sky, only the low scudding white snow clouds and that ghostly wind.

Then another tree sprang from the darkness at him, and his foot caught a root as he tried to turn. The forest spun around him, and the dirt smacked the side of his head. He tried to rise, but pain shot through his leg. Something wrong with his ankle—a break or a sprain, it didn't matter which now. He wasn't going to run any farther tonight.

He raised himself on his elbows and managed to drag his body to the base of the tree that had cost him his flight. He twisted around to a sitting position with his back to the trunk, and worked his pistol out. Seven shots left. Six for them, and one

Then he heard them. A snuffling sound in the darkness. The tree was large—they would have to come at him from the front. He braced the gun across his good knee and waited.

Section I: "What Have We To Do With Walking Corpses?"

Chapter 1: "Two Small Puncture Marks *Where*?"
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Chapter 3: "The Natives Believe Many Strange Things."
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Section II: "Werewolves Can't Climb Trees."

Chapter 5: "Good Lord, Illya—What Was That?"
Chapter 6: "My Pets Seem To Be Restive Tonight."
Chapter 7: "Oh-oh, Here Comes Zoltan."
Chapter 8: "Begone, You Fiend Of Satan!"

Section III: "Into The Darkness Where The Undead Wait."

Chapter 9: "The Only Way Out Is Through."
Chapter 10: "The Coffin Is Empty."
Chapter 11: "There Must Be A Logical, Rational Explanation."
Chapter 12: "You're Looking Inscrutable Again."

Section IV: "The Vampire Has Been Dead Many Times...."

Chapter 13: "I Smell A Rat—A Rat With Feathers."
Chapter 14: "Only When I Am In Costume."
Chapter 15: "My Sense Of Humor Will Be The Death Of Me Yet."
Chapter 16: "He's Lying, Of Course."

Section I: "What Have We To Do With Walking Corpses?"

Chapter 1: "Two Small Puncture Marks *Where*?"

Routine communications enter the New York headquarters of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement by teletype—and an amazing range of material is classified as "routine." Reports on the movements of suspicious individuals; queries for financial data on certain little-publicized companies; announcements of changes in personnel by recruitment, disconnection, retirement, or death; detailed descriptions of objects whose owners consider their very existence a well-kept secret; and complete, objective data on vast numbers of crimes ranging from loitering to attempted genocide. And it is a sad comment on the world of today that the most common crime so reported is murder.

Murder simple, in the heat of rage, with the nearest blunt instrument. Murder complex, with years of planning behind it and obscure Oriental poisons. Murder obvious, with a bullet hole in the back of the head. Murder subtle, with an important political figure collapsing of an apparent heart attack. And, occasionally, murder problematical, with a body found leaning against a tree in a forest in Rumania, as if he had sat down to rest—but a body with a greenstick fracture of the right ankle, an empty gun clenched in the right hand, and not a drop of blood in the veins.

* * *

Alexander Waverly, head of North American Operations for U.N.C.L.E., tossed the ragged-edged piece of yellow paper on his desk with a snort of disgust, and poked at his intercom. "What practical joker brought in this message purporting to be from Geneva?"

There was a momentary pause, and the voices answered uncertainly, "The packet was not tampered with between the message room and your hands, sir."

Waverly snorted. "All right. Give me Section Four."

His intercom hissed and clicked, and another voice said, "Communications —Carmichael."

"Waverly here. Who decoded the message from Geneva this morning? I'm interested specifically in section 23-5."

"I'll check, sir, but I believe I did."

"Please give the original ciphered text to the computer again, and bring it up with the results. I have found what appears to be a deciphering error, and I should like to be sure it will not happen again."

"Uh...right away, sir."

Waverly cut off the intercom and leaned back in his chair. *I never enjoyed being an ogre,* he thought. *But sometimes it is best to throw a scare into a worker before he does something that could cause a great deal of trouble.* He sighed, chose a pipe from the rack on his desk, and began to fill it from the humidor. When it was full he frowned at it as though he had forgotten what it was, then sat it down on his desk and began working through a set of reports from New Delhi.

A few minutes later his secretary announced Miss Carmichael, Section Four.

She carried two scrolls of yellow teletype paper, and advanced on Waverly's desk. "I re-ran the entire segment 23," she said without preamble. "Here is the text, just as it came off the machine." She emphasized the last phrase, defiantly.

Without a word, Waverly took the scroll and unrolled it. Part five...There it was.

"Regret to report death of Carl Endros, field agent from New York on temporary duty with Budapest office. On duty, routine investigation of

rumors in rural area of central Rumania. No findings have been filed. Technician on assignment with him reports body found by peasants. Preliminary medical report indicates cause of death to be suicide complicated by complete hemospasia."

He looked up from the message to Miss Carmichael. "Have you read this?"

"I have scanned it for any obvious errors, sir."

Waverly extended his hand for the coded original. He couldn't sight-read the U.N.C.L.E. code as swiftly or as accurately as the computer, but he was able to supply his own approximate translation of the complexly garbled characters received from Geneva.

He studied the message for several seconds, then placed it on his desk and leaned back, puffing at his pipe, with an irritated expression. "Miss Carmichael, transmit a query to Geneva. Word it politely and don't give them the impression that I'm accusing them of anything, but find out who has been engaging in attempts at humor to the expense of our time and attention. If Geneva didn't originate the message, follow it back to Budapest and see if someone there has been nipping at the slivovitz during office hours. Carl Endros is a good agent, and inclined to be forgiving of practical jokes—but we cannot afford to be."

"Yes, sir. Shall I make this an official inquiry over your signature?"

"I don't...Yes." He leaned forward and took the pipe out of his mouth. "Put my signature on it. And when you find out who is responsible, put the matter before the head of our European section."

"Excuse me, sir...."

"Yes?"

"If the report should turn out not to be a joke?"

Waverly frowned. "If have a great deal of faith in Carl. If he had been shot, poisoned, blown up or impaled I should regret his loss. But the idea that he should commit suicide is patently ridiculous. If they think he did, get as much data as possible to me at once. And find out what the devil they mean by 'complete hemospasia.'"

Miss Carmichael nodded, swept up her original, and was gone. Alexander Waverly returned his attention to the reports on his desk.

* * *

Napoleon Solo's desk phone buzzed, and, as it had so many times before, the cool impersonal voice of Waverly's secretary invited him up to his superior's office. There was no hint of the type of invitation—it could be for a reprimand, a commendation, or a discussion of something interesting that had come up. Or it could be an assignment. He hoped so—he had been sitting around the office for almost a month, since returning from two busy months along the south coast of Spain keeping a misplaced H-bomb out of unfriendly hands and trying to get a glacially attractive countess into his own friendly hands.

The weather had been warm in Almeria, and the weather had been cool in New York when he had returned. But now it was the middle of April, and even the attractions of climate could not keep him from growing bored with more than three consecutive weeks of inaction. He had completed his income tax forms, read several books he'd been meaning to get around to, and studied all the reports from U.N.C.L.E. offices around the world that had come across his desk. He had worked out in the gymnasium and the target range, improving his armed and unarmed fighting, and had begun to practice with throwing knives. But he found it difficult to concentrate on anything without the pressure he was so used to in the field.

As he came out of his cubicle, he saw his partner, Illya Kuryakin, halfway up the hall ahead of him, going in the same direction, and hurried to catch him. Illya turned at the soft sound of a footstep.

"Ah, Napoleon. Did Mr. Waverly call you just now?"

Napoleon nodded. "We've been in drydock for three weeks, and I feel like I'm rusting away. Hope it's an assignment —

"Hey," he said, interrupting himself, "I learned a new one yesterday. Make like you're coming at me with a knife."

Illya dropped into a crouch, a pen from his shirt pocket gripped in his fist. He circled Napoleon warily, then feinted to the left and drove in from the right. Napoleon swung his left wrist across Illya's pushing the pen just enough off-course that it grazed his side harmlessly, and let his right palm come up against Illya's face, with the first and second fingers bent and resting lightly on the eyelids.

Illya recovered his balance. "Good," he said. "But if you could grab the wrist and pull forward, there would be additional force in the blow to the face. Also less opportunity for me to duck to one side and butt you in the stomach."

Napoleon grinned as they started off down the corridor again. "As a matter of fact, that's what I just unlearned. Trouble with the other way, it had both hands tied up. If you had a second knife, I'd be laid out like a mackerel. This way, my left hand is free..."

They continued talking shop as they made their way through the busy steel corridors of U.N.C.L.E. headquarters to Waverly's office. Napoleon remembered to straighten his tie and settle his coat more properly on his shoulders before they went in—Illya just ran a quick hand through his hair as the automatic door slid quietly open before them.

Inside, Waverly looked up from his desk with a black frown. There was a sheet of teletype paper before him, and without a word he picked it up and handed it across to them as they sat down. Napoleon took it and Illya read over his shoulder.

Carl Endros had been a casual acquaintance, one to whom they had nodded in the commissary, but he had also been an agent of U.N.C.L.E., just as they

were, and his death came to remind them that either of them could have been in the same position. But the manner of his death

Napoleon looked up with a puzzled expression. "I can't see Carl killing himself. Have you checked with Section Six for his last physical and mental tests?"

"Yes," said Waverly shortly. "Checked out perfectly. Read on."

Napoleon did. Then his eyebrows came together. Then they rose. He looked up again. "It's two weeks late for April Fool's," he said.

"You are correct, Mr. Solo," said Waverly. "It is not a joke. Unless Carlo has taken leave of his senses and infected the rest of the European division with a grisly sense of humor." Carlo Amalfi was in Europe what Alexander Waverly was in North America. They had been personal friends for twenty years, and he was one of less than a dozen people in the world who called Waverly by his first name.

When Napoleon finished the report he looked up. "It sounds like he blew his brains out, all right," he admitted. "But what could have caused such a massive loss of blood the medical examiner would comment on it?"

"We don't know," said Waverly, staring idly at the bowl of his pipe. "It will be your job to find out."

"According to Eclary, the technician who found the body, there were no footprints in the soft dirt or in the snow around the body," said Illya, still studying the report. "He was shot at close range with his own pistol. Except for the fractured ankle, he appeared to be completely uninjured except for two small puncture marks at the base of the throat...." His voice trailed off.

Napoleon swiveled his head to look at his partner. "Two small puncture marks *where?*" he asked.

"At the base of the throat, it says. Right over the large vein. Oh yes, Eclary checked over the area and back-trailed him a short distance—says the

footprints leading to the spot were running and irregular, and the post-mortem mentions evidence of extreme fatigue in the leg muscles."

"In other words," said Napoleon to no one in particular, "he ran until he couldn't run any longer, then sat down under a tree in the snow and shot himself. Then he lay there in a pool of blood until some peasants found him."

"Not quite," said Illya. "Eclary specifically mentions that there was no blood around the corpse. A little on the tree behind his head—that's all."

Napoleon didn't say anything. He looked at Waverly, then he looked at Illya. Then he took the paper from Illya's hand and read it all the way through again, carefully.

Finally he said, "After he shot himself, whatever was chasing him caught him. And where is this little village of Pokol?"

"Eclary's report was filed from the city of Brasov," said Illya. "That is just south of the center of Rumania, in the foothills of the Transylvanian Alps."

Napoleon looked closely at Illya. After a moment he said, "You're looking inscrutable. What are you thinking about the Transylvanian Alps?"

"Nothing in particular," said Illya slowly. "Just thinking. What does Transylvania suggest to you?"

Napoleon laughed. "Old movies. Bela Lugosi, werewolves, bad photography and melodramatic scripts."

"Has it ever occurred to you to wonder why they were always laid in Transylvania?"

"Now that you mention it, no. I suppose because the first one was."

"There are traditions in Rumania, Napoleon. Traditions and legends which..."

"Mr. Kuryakin!" Waverly's voice cut across between the two of them. "We are not dealing here with superstitious nonsense. We are dealing with the death of a very real agent of our organization. Unless you wish to request transfer to another assignment, you will be accompanying Mr. Solo to Pokol to investigate the circumstances surrounding this death. You are no more satisfied with the simple statement of suicide than I am. I suggest you make an attempt to keep your minds off nursery tales and things that go bump in the night, and concentrate on identifying the person or persons responsible for the murder of your co-worker. You will also want to clarify the circumstances surrounding his death in an attempt to arrive at an adequate explanation of the cause or causes. To this end," he continued, rummaging about in a drawer, "I have informed Budapest to expect you Friday afternoon. You will have all day tomorrow to pack and prepare." He came up with two envelopes and handed them across the table. "Here are your tickets. You will leave Kennedy International tomorrow night and change at Copenhagen."

He stared at Illya, then at Napoleon. "Unless you would rather let this assignment go by?"

"Oh, no," said Napoleon quickly. "I've had almost a month's vacation, and this sounds like it might be interesting."

"Yes, of course," said Illya. "The mountains are especially beautiful at this time of year."

"Very good," said Waverly. "There will be no further discussion of the folklore of the area."

"Yes, sir," they said together.

"If there are any more questions, they will be answered by the head of the Budapest office."

"Yes, sir," they said again, picked up their tickets, and left.

Once outside, they paused and looked at each other. At last Illya said, without looking at his partner, "I wonder whether a silver crucifix would be considered non-standard equipment?"

Napoleon stared at him with surprise. "Don't tell me you actually think that..."

"Of course not," said Illya quickly. "All the same, it wouldn't be any extra trouble to carry."

Napoleon laughed. "Oh, come on!" he said. "Next thing you'll be down in the armory asking them to run you up some cartridges with silver slugs in them."

Illya glanced sideways at his friend, and pursed his lips thoughtfully. "You know," he said, "that might not be a bad idea...." Then he sighed. "No, they'd only make snide remarks. And they'd want to know why. And then I'd have to tell them.... No, I guess it's not worth it."

"Okay," said Napoleon seriously. "If you want to bring a silver crucifix along, I promise not to kid you about it."

"I appreciate your consideration," Illya said thoughtfully.

"By the way," said Napoleon suddenly after a minute's silence, "do you think you could manage to make that two of them?"

Chapter 2: "What Does *'Vlkoslak'* Mean?"

The flight was uneventful, except for the usual frustration of having only three hours between planes in Copenhagen—too long to sit around the airport, and not enough to go anywhere. Napoleon tried to call a couple of old friends, and found a girl named Gütte who had shared action with them over a year ago. She came out to Kastrup airport, bought them lunch, and kept their minds occupied with inconsequential chatter until the flight for Budapest left at noon.

At 4 o'clock their S-A-S jet thundered low over the outskirts of the Hungarian capital and landed them, if not behind the Iron Curtain, at least within one of its shallower folds. Passports and visas had been checked through the United Network Command office from Copenhagen, but as usual in this part of the world something had gone wrong.

Illya, fluent in Hungarian, attempted to deal with an official who held custody of the validating stamp, and who seemed to have an almost pathological fear of anything not covered explicitly in her book of regulations. Illya alternately bullied her and comforted her until she was completely confused, while Napoleon anxiously scanned the faces in the concourse for someone from the local branch of U.N.C.L.E.

With one ear he tried to follow the conversation between his partner and the clerk. Illya was saying, "My dear madame, we are (—something—) tourists who want (—something—) to see your beautiful country. Would you have us stand here three days and (—something—) the next airplane back to Copenhagen?"

Napoleon usually left the more guttural Slavic tongues to Illya, who possessed a native ability to pronounce interminable strings of consonants as if vowels were an unnecessary bourgeois luxury. Rumanian had enough in common with Italian, however, that Napoleon could make himself understood quite adequately, even if his accent left something to be desired.

A tall dark man with a long, mournful face came hurrying across the floor towards them, wallet in hand. As he came up to Napoleon the wallet popped open and a gold card caught the light. "Mr. Solo?" he said. Napoleon nodded. "I am Djelas Krepescu. Sorry for the delay—we had automotive trouble. Is there any difficulty here?"

He turned toward the counter, where Illya had stopped talking and was looking at him. He frowned at the clerk, whose eyebrows crept up her forehead, and spoke swiftly in Hungarian. Illya answered, and Krepescu said something to the clerk, emphasizing with a wave of his hand. She nodded vigorously and stamped the passports. She smiled apologetically at

Napoleon, displaying a glittering row of metallic teeth, and said something to Illya about the noble gentlemen being very patient.

Once in the car, Djelas explained, "The clerk was being uncommonly difficult. She thought you were both Russian tourists, and there are many Hungarians who have no reason to love the Russians. As soon as I explained to her that you were Americans, and friends of mine, she was pleased to cooperate."

Napoleon glanced at Illya, who sat staring out a window, apparently lost in thought. It would be hard to explain to the poor woman how someone could be both Russian and American at the same time. "Well," he said, "we appreciate your help. We're going to need a lot more before we get out of here. Is everything cleared for us to fly to Bucharest this weekend?"

Djelas looked very sad. "The swiftness with which this has come upon us has made air reservations impossible to obtain. However, you can leave by rail Monday afternoon and arrive in Brasov Tuesday evening. It will be faster than waiting a week and flying to Bucharest, and then making rail connections from there."

Napoleon nodded. "It'll give us a better look at the country. I hear it's beautiful this time of year."

"Yes," said Djelas. "The air is rare and clear in the mountains, though it is quite cold."

Illya looked away from the passing view of the Andrassy Avenue and said, "What do you know about our reason for going to Brasov?"

The long face grew even longer. "The tragic death of Carl Endros. I met him only once, but I do not think such a man could kill himself unless something very wrong had happened to him. He was here for a few days on his way to Brasov about a month ago. We heard some strange things reported to our office in Bucharest, and Carl was interested to go and look them over."

"What sort of strange things?"

Djelas was hesitant. "Very strange things indeed—things which the peasants talk about among themselves and blow out of all proportion. We have the reports available for you to study. But please remember the facts are not known—all we have are rumors."

"What sort of rumors?" Illya persisted.

Djelas toyed with the end of his tie and looked about him. "As well as we can find, a pair of months ago or more or less, a body was found in the woods near the village of Pokol. Then, some few days later, another body. Both were dressed in peasant clothes, but neither was known to anyone in the area, and of course neither had any identification. Both were apparently killed the same way—very brutally. They were buried in the community cemetery at Pokol, with more ceremony than you would expect for total strangers."

Illya sighed. "And I suppose the bodies were both drained of blood?"

Djelas looked at the floor, and then out the window. At last he said, "I do not know of any medical report on the bodies. As I said, the peasants make up such stories and then expand them out of all proportion—"

"In other words, they were," said Napoleon.

"We don't *know* that," said Djelas quickly. "Under the circumstances we have begun proceedings to have the bodies exhumed and examined. All we know is that two bodies were found in the woods. The government is very sensitive about appearances..."

"And the whereabouts of all its citizens," muttered Illya.

"... and the fact of the bodies and the burials is quite well documented. But the rumors around them grew so prevalent that Mr. Endros went to Pokol to interview some of the witnesses. His one preliminary report was vague, but

indicated he had traced the individuals who found the bodies. They swore to him that they had been bled dry."

Napoleon laughed. "Sounds like a psychotic killer in the village. A bit of detective work, Illya, and we can go home again."

"I hope so, Napoleon," said the Russian agent slowly. "I sincerely hope so."

* * *

They spent the next few hours reading over the reports that had been filed as referring to the finding of two unidentified bodies in the Transylvanian forests, and learned nothing. The rumors had placed the bodies at a dozen different spots in the mountains, from the Rosul Pass to the Prahova Valley; there were as few as two and as many as fifteen; they were all men, or men, women and children. But all the rumors agreed on the essential point—the manner of death.

Napoleon put the last sheet down and sighed. "Someone has gone to a great deal of trouble collecting all these," he said, indicating the sheaf of pages. "I'm sorry I don't appreciate them more."

Illya nodded. "We know nothing now that we didn't know four hours ago, and we have in addition received a great deal of confusing and contradictory data which is not only unnecessary, but a possible liability."

Napoleon chuckled. "You're starting to sound like Djelas. I think he learned English by memorizing a dictionary." He leaned back in his chair and stretched. "Well," he said, "now what? It looks to me like a plain case of murder. Some poor backwoods Rumanian has spun out, and killed two tramps in the woods. Carl was onto something, possibly went to his suspect, and got the same treatment. Now we go in, solve the puzzle, hand it over to the local police, who will proceed to take all the credit while thanking us privately, and then go home. I wonder if we could wrangle few days free in the area. There's a good ski resort at Poiana Brasov...."

"Possibly," said Illya. "Did you check with our host about accommodations for the weekend?"

"We can stay here. It's less trouble than trying to arrange for a hotel." He looked at his watch as a dark and pretty secretary came in and started gathering up the papers. "It's about eight o'clock, if I have my time zones straight. Is there any night life in this town?"

Illya looked surprised. "Napoleon, this is the capital city of Hungary. There is more night life here than in Madrid, Athens or Amsterdam. And I have never heard you complain about their quiet." He thought. "Dinner at the *New York*, and probably a show at the *Budapest Night Club*."

The secretary looked up. "The *New York*? Where is that?"

Illya considered. "That's right. It's the *Hungarica* now."

"Oh!" she said happily. "If you can drive me home, I can be ready in fifteen minutes."

Illya looked at Napoleon, who grinned and shrugged. "Certainly," he said, and smiled. "You will be our native guide."

* * *

The food at the *Hungarica* was as good as Illya had promised, and they were on their way to catch the last show at the *Budapest*. Napoleon felt ill at ease among the deserted streets—the broad boulevards almost empty of cars, and pedestrians scattered along the sidewalks bundled like stuffed dolls against the freezing air. The streets were well enough lit, but seemed quiet. He missed the flashing neon and garish colors that no main street in America was without—lights that shouted of life and action. Here there were only streetlights, and a few modest signs.

Elena, their secretary-guide, poked Illya and said, "Over there."

Illya looked, and saw a group of men hurrying along together in a tight knot. Something about the way they moved smelled of trouble. He said, "Napoleon...." and the American looked too.

"Wonder what it is," he said. "Looks like a lynch mob."

"Not good," said Elena nervously. "I think we stay away from them. You are strangers, and many people, even here, are suspicious. Besides, Mr. Krepescu would blame me if you got into trouble with the Security Police."

"Well, *they* don't look like police to me," said Napoleon. "And I'd hate to be whoever they're after."

"There he goes," said Illya suddenly. "He just ducked out of the doorway and headed down the side street."

"Pull around the block, and maybe we can give him a lift somewhere. If he turns out to be wanted, we can always say he forced us."

Illya nodded, and ran the car around a series of four corners. In a little over a minute they were coming up the street towards a lone figure who was walking quickly along, close to the building fronts, but not hiding.

"There he is," said Elena, resigning herself to becoming involved. "Oh, comrade—" she called out the window.

He stiffened and looked around him, but said nothing. They couldn't see his face, but he was tall and lean, well dressed, with a light felt hat at a rakish angle on his head, and a walking stick.

Illya stuck his head out. "Is there any trouble?"

"None at all, my friend. Merely out for an evening's stroll."

"And walking a whole pack of dogs," Napoleon said under his breath. "Illya, stick around until that bunch comes around the corner."

It was only a moment's wait. Perhaps half a dozen men, mostly young, moving in a close-packed group, appeared around the corner. They paused as they caught sight of the car, and then came forward hesitantly, breaking apart a little.

The well-dressed gentleman took an involuntary step a little closer to the car, then caught himself. "I really must be getting on," he said. "Thank you for your consideration." And he started off again.

The group broke into a trot, and as they passed the car Illya asked, "What's going on here?"

Apparently a trace of accent gave him away, because one of the younger men snapped, "No concern of yours, *Russkya*."

Illya put the car in gear and made a tight U-turn in the deserted street. Then he was cruising along in the same direction as the gang, with his open window facing them. He spoke casually, as if disinterested. "If you're not chasing him, why do you stay so close behind him? And if you are chasing him, why don't you catch him?"

"You wouldn't understand if we told you," said another youth. "We just don't want his kind around here."

Illya touched the gas pedal and pulled ahead until he was abreast of the lone man. "They say they don't want your kind around," he said. "What kind are you?" He sounded only idly curious, and not at all dangerous.

The man turned his head only slightly. "I am Rumanian. But I have not been to my home in many years. Now I am sorry to see how my neighbors have changed, and I fear my own land will have changed more."

Illya touched the brake and waited for the gang. "He says he's Rumanian. What do you have against them?"

An older man, breathing heavily, stepped towards the car. "Yes, he is Rumanian. But we have no dislike of them. *He* is hated by them as well,

because they know him better."

"What has he done?" asked Illya, now genuinely interested.

The old man gave a sound between a snort and a grunt. "What has he done?" he repeated. "He is *Vlkoslak*—that is enough. We cannot kill him, but we may drive him away."

The lone man stopped and turned. "A lie," he said. "And you will apologize." He took a step towards the man who had spoken and raised his stick threateningly.

Then the sidewalk was suddenly active. Two young men leaped forward and seized the stick while two more charged at the well-dressed one. The two older men started to move in as Illya set the brake and leaped from the car. Napoleon was right behind him.

With instinctive division of labor, Napoleon went for the two who had grabbed the stick. Aware of his uncertain status in a country touchy about foreigners, his style was cramped by the need to avoid any injury to his opponents while they were bound by no such rules.

In a moment he had the stick, and one attacker was doubled over clutching at the part of his stomach where the ferrule had driven the wind out of him. The other just avoided a nasty crack in the shins and bored in on Napoleon, fists swinging wildly. Napoleon sidestepped neatly, and caught him a paralyzing blow on the bicep that would not even leave a bruise. When the young man swung around to attack with his remaining good arm, Napoleon casually reached across and clipped it too. Taking advantage of a free moment, he turned to look around.

The lean man was not an easy customer to handle. Apparently he was well-trained in *la savat*, the French style of foot-fighting which makes even a tough knife-fighter think twice before attacking. He stood lightly balanced on the balls of his feet, in a half-crouch, his two hands clasping his elbows and his interlocked forearms held perhaps six inches in front of his chest. One of his assailants was stretched out on his back, unmoving, apparently

having caught a toe under the jaw. The other was circling, looking for an opening. Before he could react, a foot shot out, close to the ground, and his own legs were swept from under him. He sat down very hard on the pavement.

Napoleon handed the gentleman's stick back to him with a slight bow, and addressed him tentatively in French. "My compliments on the footwork, my friend. Do you often have occasion to practice?"

"Only the last few days," said the other, in moderately accented English. "My knowledge of the art was mainly theoretical until I chose to return to my homeland. Your handling of—was that karate?—is quite professional."

Illya broke in. "You can compliment each other later. Come over here and listen to these two."

He had both old gentlemen pinned down, and neither of them was acting particularly gentlemanly. Both were using words far outside Napoleon's Hungarian vocabulary, but he gathered from the few cognates he caught that their speech was even worse than their behavior. Illya tried to question them as to their motives, but it was obvious nothing more could be gotten out of them.

At last Illya gave up, shook them both soundly, and set them down on the pavement with their friend. He patted them each lightly on the cheek, and said, "Remember in the future, when you gang up on someone, be sure you have a large enough gang." He turned to their rescued friend and said, "Can we take you somewhere?"

He shook his head, and said, "My hotel is but a few streets from here. These peasants will not molest me again."

Napoleon looked at the figures scattered about the sidewalk and said, "I hope you weren't planning on staying very long. They probably have friends."

"No, I am flying to Bucharest Tuesday. I am returning to my ancestral home after a great many years." He sighed. "I fear it will not be the same land I left."

Now at last Napoleon got a clear look at his face under the streetlight. He looked about thirty, and had deep-set black eyes of the type described in another part of the world as "eyes that could see through a brick wall." His cheekbones were high and his lips thin, and his head was carried proudly. Probably some small Count, Napoleon thought automatically. A lot of young sons had been displaced by the war, and the political situation following it, and had been filtering back over the years to view their ancestral acreage.

"Pardon me," he said before turning to go, "but may I have the pleasure of knowing your names?"

Napoleon and Illya introduced themselves, and he repeated their names, and thanked them. "I hope we may meet again," he said. "Until we do, remember Zoltan, whom you saved from an embarrassing circumstance this night." He bowed, and strolled off down the street.

The two U.N.C.L.E. agents looked at each other, and shrugged. Elena was the first one to speak. "We are too late for the last show," she said unhappily.

Napoleon laughed. "Now really, didn't you think our show was better than anything they could put on a stage?"

"Well...yes, but it was over so quickly I could hardly tell what was happening."

"We promise to reënact it all in slow motion for you sometime," he promised. "But I think right now we had better be going, before our antagonistic citizenry rouse themselves and take it into their minds to find out who we are and cause trouble for us."

They loaded into the car again and Illya took them around two or three quick corners and back into the Andrassy Avenue. As they rolled back towards the U.N.C.L.E. office, Napoleon said thoughtfully, "You understand the language better than I do. Did the old boys mention any reason for trying to run down Zoltan?"

Illya shook his head. "They just called him—and us—a lot of bad names. Nothing particularly original or edifying."

Napoleon thought a while longer. "What was that the old man said that got Zoltan so steamed up? 'He is—something—that is enough.' Val...? Volko...? *Vlkoslak*—that was it. What does *'vlkoslak'* mean?"

Illya looked straight ahead over the steering wheel at the street. "I can only think of one definition," he said hesitantly. "It must be a slang use."

"*Vlkoslak*?" said Elena. "It's not any slang that I know of. It's a peasant word for the *wampyr*—a kind of flying ghost that attacks their herds at night."

"*Wampyr?*" said Napoleon, an odd feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Vampire," said Illya, without a flicker of expression.

Chapter 3: "The Natives Believe Many Strange Things."

They left Budapest by train Monday afternoon, and went to sleep that night while the flat farmlands of the Alföld were rolling endlessly past their windows. They were awakened about dawn by an apologetic conductor, who told them the border check was approaching and requested them to have their passports ready for the inspectors.

The scenery hadn't changed, except for the addition of a few trees to the grasslands, but when the train rounded a curve Napoleon could see the dark shadows of mountains rising far ahead of them against the soft gray sky.

It was still not full day when the train whistled to a stop at a station. The change in motion reawakened both U.N.C.L.E. agents, who had gone back to sleep with their passports in their hands. Illya yawned widely, stretched, and looked out the window. "Border check," he said.

Napoleon saw the name of the city, and smiled. "We are at Curtici," he said. "I hope they live up to their name."

"Not 'courtesy,' Napoleon," said Illya patiently. "Kur-*teech*."

Napoleon shrugged and leaned back in the seat. He felt sticky and unpleasant, as he always did after sleeping in his clothes. The car was cold, and he had slept poorly. The only source of heat was a burner in one corner with two adjustments—off and on—and they had decided about midnight that freezing was preferable to asphyxiation. Napoleon's only comments had been, "I'm glad we waited for first-class accommodations." Illya had made no comment.

The guard who checked their passports entered with a truculent air which Napoleon fully understood, considering the hour, and requested their papers. He looked closely at the diplomatic passports they gave him, and his face lit up when he saw their names. "Ah!" he said in English. "You are told to me by the telegraph. You do a good work here. People thank you many much. I am pleasure to..." He groped for a word. "... to write your passport." And he rubberstamped the proper place on their visas, touched his hat brim, and went out.

Napoleon looked at his partner with canted eyebrows. "Nothing like secrecy in every operation," he said. "I wonder who told us to him by the telegraph."

"Probably Brasov Securitate," said Illya. "They've got a messy job on their hands, and we are taking over for them."

The Securitate is not exactly a secret police; these are mostly things of the past in Europe today. Their existence is as widely admitted and advertised as is that of the F.B.I., and their avowed purposes are much the same,

though their methods may differ. They keep watch over problems which affect the whole country; they are available to assist local law enforcement; they take special responsibility for tourists, especially those from the West. And now they had an American murdered, or at least committing suicide under highly unusual circumstances. It was not a good thing for their reputations, and if the victim's own people were willing to take the burden of the case, it would be relinquished to them with pleasure.

"It's a relief to have them on our side for a change," said Napoleon, and he meant it. All but one of the few times he had been in Rumania, his actions there would have appeared highly questionable, not to say illegal, to the established authorities. And Napoleon Solo was not one to prefer bucking the tide of public opinion. Coöperation, whenever practical, was his motto.

As the day expanded across the sky, and breakfast came and went, the terrain grew rougher. The mountains were on both sides of them now, but still a respectful distance back from the river they were following. There were more trees now, too, between the open farmlands and climbing up the blue hazy slopes that edged the valley.

When they stopped for lunch, Illya noticed a clock in the station and pointed it out to Napoleon. "Set your watch ahead an hour," he said. "If I hadn't been half asleep at the border I'd have remembered then. Hungary is on the same time as the rest of Europe, but Rumania is on Turkish Standard."

"Marvelous," said Napoleon. "Have you ever thought of hiring on as a professional guide?"

"That's all right, Napoleon," said Illya comfortingly. "You'll feel better with a hot bath and some fresh clothes. We'll be arriving in Brasov about sundown, and a short drive back into the mountains will have us at our destination."

"You drive," said Napoleon. "You know the country."

"Eclary will be meeting us in Brasov with the car," said Illya, "and he will drive us both."

"That's the technician who was working with Carl, isn't it? Did you pick up any data on him?"

Illya shrugged. "Young, but reasonably competent. Native of the area, educated in Cluj, no particular politics. Training in history and folklore—all this according to Djelas. The competency is my own opinion, based on the fact that he has not been found sitting in the woods bled dry by this mysterious menace that got Carl and two other natives of the area who should have known better."

"At least he hadn't when we left Budapest," said Napoleon. "When he meets us at the station, I'll be confident in him."

* * *

About mid-afternoon they crossed the Rosul Pass amid dark pines and craggy rocks, and shortly before dusk they came down from another mountain towards Brasov. Away to their left ran grasslands and another range of foothills; but close on their right the Transylvanian Alps rose to rugged white-topped peaks.

It was dark when they left the train and looked around for their host. Some minutes passed in the waiting room of the station and Napoleon was on the verge of calling him on the U.N.C.L.E. transceiver when a light voice behind them said tentatively, "*Domnul* Solo? *Domnul* Kuryakin?"

He turned, and saw a girl with bluegray eyes and an uncertain smile which came and went like a light bulb that was not snug in its socket. She was casually dressed and wore a black beret at a jaunty angle on her short, dark hair. She came about up to Napoleon's chin.

"*Da*," said Illya. "Were you sent by *Domnul* Eclary?"

Her eyes widened. "*Domnul* Eclary? Oh, I see what you mean. No, I am *Domnisoara* Hilda Eclary, if that is what you mean. I was working with Carl on this vampire problem."

Napoleon decided he liked her. She was the first person he had talked to since this had started last week who openly and casually spoke of what everyone else seemed unwilling to think about. He smiled at her. "Do you call it that in your reports?"

She snorted. "Of course not. My superiors in Bucharest are very wise in the ways of their world, and would make everything fit it. But here it is a vampire. Your job is to find that it is really something else, so that Bucharest, Budapest, Geneva and New York can find the proper heading to file it under. Here and now, we are dealing with a vampire. Do you have a better or more descriptive name for it?"

Napoleon looked at the question for a while, and finally said, "Well...I guess not."

"Bring your luggage," she said. "The car is out here." And she started briskly towards the door.

* * *

Twenty minutes later they were rolling south through the outskirts of the city, towards the mountains. The old black Poboda was laden with three suitcases and a trunk full of items which were not only somewhat more than standard for tourists, but which would have given any customs official in Europe heart failure.

The headlights splashed yellow across the narrowing road which wound up into the night. The stars were sharp and clear, but there was no moon. There would be none for another few days. Pine trees rose as black shapes along the road and flicked by like telephone poles. There were no other cars.

As the last of the houses slipped behind them and the mountain darkness rose ahead, Illya asked, "How far it is it to Pokol?"

"It will take us about three hours," said Hilda obliquely. "The road is narrow and sometimes we must go slowly."

"Well," said Napoleon, "we've read the reports that were filed on your investigations here. And one impression I felt more than any other was that they omitted a great deal. You didn't dare tell Budapest that you thought you were up against a vampire..."

"Would you?" she asked. "I like my job."

"If I really believed we were after a vampire, I would tell New York. I would tell them why, and..." His voice trailed off doubtfully.

"... And they would suggest you needed to be replaced. No, Mr. Solo, I do not believe you will find a *wampyr*, one of the undead, when everything has been learned. But in these mountains, with what has happened, do not be ashamed to think of it as a vampire until you can prove something else. The village is not far from the city in miles, but it has been out of the tide of the present for long years. The old ways are strong in Pokol, and it is easier to do as your father did than to think of new ways."

"I can see this," said Illya. "It is often the same way in our country. But do they still cling even to their old bogies?"

"The natives believe many strange things," Hilda said. "Perhaps it is the country, perhaps it is the mountains. Perhaps it is the mass of unquestioning belief that sets eyes in the darkness and strange things in the forests at night. But do not make fun of the people who live here and know the place until you have lived here, and seen and felt what they see and feel."

The road was quite narrow now, and the pines were a black wall pressing close along the edge of the headlights. The road rose and turned, following a wandering route deep into the heart of the mountains. Napoleon looked up at the night, craning his neck to see the stars, frosty sharp and clear.

"It's cold for April," he said conversationally.

"Not for here," said Hilda. "It could very well snow again anytime in the next month. Remember, we are high in the mountains and getting higher, and we have no Mediterranean near to keep us warm."

The night was so clear, the starlight showed Napoleon little patches of white under the trees. *Probably patches from the last snowfall*, he thought. There was a moment of nerve-end tension when he saw what looked like the figure of a man with a rifle crouching beside the road, and another moment of relief when the car turned suddenly and the headlights showed it to be a bush. Napoleon looked closely at it as they passed, but saw no indication that it had ever been anything else.

The night seemed darker, for some reason, and the woods looked somehow menacing. Napoleon suddenly felt how large the darkness around them was, and in a brief mental picture saw as if from an airplane the great area of the mountains, with a tiny speck of light lost in the loneliness like a buoy in the middle of the boundless sea.

It seemed a long time later that Hilda spoke again. "*Domn* Kuryakin, there need be no reference to the country of your birth. The passport with which you have been supplied lists you as American. Let it stand. Pokol is far from the modern world, but not so far that they know nothing of her latest rulers. There is little love for the conquerors here. These are simple people, and direct. They love, they hate, they fear. But they continue to live. We have been a conquered people many times in the past—but this is not something one can come to accept. Before Rumania began, we were conquered by Attila the Hun, who used this land as a base while he sacked the treasure-houses of Europe from the North Sea to Rome. Ancient legends put his treasure stores in these mountains. But Rumania is not a rich country. Wealth only flows through to line the pockets of those who rule us."

She sighed. "Please forgive me. I am talking to myself. Please think nothing of what I have said." She paused, and glanced around. "Perhaps it is the night and..." She stopped. Her two passengers were asleep.

Chapter 4: "Well, It Looked Like A Huge Bat...."

They awoke when the car stopped, and the motor was turned off. Napoleon lifted a head and looked around. He could see the edges of the village both ahead and behind him, and a large brick building stood beside the narrow street where they had stopped.

Hilda noticed his movement, and said, "It will be necessary for you to check in with the local head of the Securitate at once. He will give you the necessary coupons for a room at the inn and meals there."

The brick building was post-war, and included in its decoration busts of noble, bearded figures of revolutionary history. Here and there waited an empty niche where some forgotten hero no longer resided and had not been replaced. Lights flowed warm and yellow from the windows.

Illya stretched and yawned. "I presume this is the City Hall?"

"Yes," said Hilda. "*Satul Contru*. The lights are on in *Gradatul* Hanevitch's office. We will be going in to see him. Leave your luggage in the car, but have your coats buttoned up. It is cold tonight."

The frosty air stung Napoleon's nose as he opened the car door and inhaled, but the scent of the pines was sharp and clean. "Ah!" he said. "The great outdoors." He got stiffly out, followed by Illya, and started up the steps to the big wooden doors. Hilda followed them in.

Gradat Hanevitch sat behind an ornately carved wooden desk littered with papers. He wore an untidy uniform, with the hat hung on the back of his swivel chair, which was tilted to its fullest extent. He had a broad face and a bushy red beard, with twinkly blue eyes and ruddy cheeks above it. He was ignoring them as they entered, concentrating on a cork target hanging on the side wall some ten feet away. Resting on the desk at his elbow was an assortment of letter-openers of various sizes and types, and three more nested in various quarters of the target. As they watched from the doorway, his wrist flipped, and a fourth one appeared near the center. Without turning his head, he greeted them.

"*Domnisoara* Eclary, I presume these are the two gentlemen you told me about. Introduce us and be seated."

"*Gradat* Hanevitch, this is Napoleon Solo and this is Illya Kuryakin, of the U.N.C.L.E. office in New York. You will remember, that is where *Domn* Endros was from."

"I remember," said the officer, and flipped another letter opener. Then he turned in his swivel chair to face them. "You will be the men to save my reputation and my job. I have represented the Government in this village for over thirty years, and now my position is no longer a sinecure. This cursed vampire has started people talking all along the mountains, and whenever my name is mentioned it is with ridicule." He sat upright and placed both hands on the desk, palms up. "What am I supposed to do? I am a faithful servant of the powers of the law, but the law tells me plainly there is no such thing as a vampire. If I ask them for advice on how to rid my village of such a thing, I will be ignored. Worse, I shall be suspect from then on."

"All we ask is your coöperation," Napoleon said. "We will probably be doing some fairly strange things in the next few days. You'll just have to trust us."

"The reputation of U.N.C.L.E. is well-known, if not exactly spotless where my government is concerned," said the other. He laughed shortly. "But my position is at stake, and I feel it would be in the best long-range interests of the government were I to remain as Chief of Police in Pokol."

Napoleon looked slightly puzzled. "Chief of Police? I thought you were head of the Securitate here."

"I am," he said with a shrug. "I am also the head of the Fire Brigade and the Communist Party Leader for the town. Not to mention Judge of the local court, and Postmaster."

"And groom of the second floor front?" said Illya.

"*Ce?*"

"Never mind him," said Napoleon. "He objects to bureaucracy."

"So do I," said the *Gradat* frankly. "And by combining so many offices between my hair and my beard, I save a truly remarkable amount of paperwork."

"And collect an equally remarkable salary," said Illya.

"You have less acquaintance with our government than I would have thought. Two of my positions are voluntary, and another is appointed but unsalaried. Each of the other three pays less than half of a living wage. This is believed to encourage efficiency among government workers. Incidentally, as Chief of Police my title is *Colonel*—I prefer it to *Gradat*."

Hilda entered the conversation. "Very well, then, *Colonel*, but it is late, and tomorrow should see the beginning of the investigation. Let us save the pleasantries for another time over *mititei* and a glass of *tuica*." She turned to Napoleon and Illya. "As far as the people of the village are concerned, you are the next-of-kin to Carl, come to the scene of his death. They will understand your desire for vengeance, and they will help you in any way they can. If the vampire can be destroyed, they will feel safer for themselves. Gheorghe, the innkeeper, knows who you are and what you're doing—it is impossible to hold secrets from an innkeeper. But while his walls have ears, they have no tongues. He will be of such assistance to you as he can."

She turned to *Colonel* Hanevitch. "Now, may we have the residence coupons? Little may be accomplished at this hour save strain on nerves."

He shrugged, and rummaged about in the clutter on top of his desk. Napoleon noticed that the envelope he finally "found" had been resting neatly on top of the left-hand heap all through the search, and wondered if there was more to this bearded Rumanian than was immediately apparent. He decided to watch him more closely and see how he reacted when things started to happen.

Hanevitch held the envelope out and Hilda took it. "Kuryakin," he said consideringly. "That is a Russian name. But you are from New York?"

"I carry an American passport," Illya said, rather stiffly. "That is all that matters."

"But it is not, my friend," said the *Colonel*. "You are a product of your mother, not your stepmother. I am a Rumanian, but I am also Russian."

"Then how is it you have represented the government, as you said, for over thirty years? The government has changed, after all."

The *Colonel* grinned broadly and innocently. "The government is the will of the people, after all," he said. "I too have changed. When I was quite young I was a strong Nationalist. But when the Germans came in to aid my poor country I discovered the virtues of Fascism and supported them wholeheartedly for a number of years. But when we were saved from the villainous Nazis by our noble Russian brothers I realized that only dedicated Communism could save the battered economy of this country."

"And you evaded the purge?"

"This is a small village, and the people know and trust me. A change of name to something more acceptable to the Russians, a statement that my Fascist successor had been executed, and I was able to continue working for my country without the least interruption.

"But as *Domnisoara* Eclary has pointed out, it is late. You will want to be safely within the inn before the hour of midnight, especially under the circumstances. There have been no corpses found since that of your unfortunate colleague, but villagers have reported mysterious things half-seen in the night all about the town."

Hilda handed the envelope to Napoleon. "He is quite correct. There is no need to tempt fate. The inn is a quarter of a mile from here, but the street is not paved, and is unsuitable for the car. We will walk. Illya?"

The Russian agent looked at Hanevitch appraisingly. "*Colonel*, do you live here in this building?"

He took his time answering, as if he were analyzing the reasons behind the question. At length he said, "No, I live a few houses away."

"Will you be going home before midnight?"

The *Colonel* did not answer.

"Are you...cautious of the threat your village is under?"

Hanevitch rose to his feet and pulled in his stomach. "The government tells me the rumors of vampires are the superstitions of uneducated peasants. I am a sincere and dedicated Communist, and Marx said nothing about undead spirits. This outrage has a material cause, and my Tokarev can stop anything material and unarmored." He slapped his hand against the bulky Russian automatic strapped to his side.

Illya slowly and casually seated himself in a convenient chair. "Napoleon," he said without turning his head, "you and Hilda go ahead to the inn. I would like to continue conversing with *Colonel* Hanevitch for a while. After all, midnight should be no deterrent to two rational men."

Napoleon started to object, but Hilda poked him in the arm. "Come *on*, Napoleon," she said. "Am I the only one here sane enough to admit I am not rational? Or are you going to let me walk through the night alone?"

Solo opened and closed his mouth two or three times, and waved his hands to emphasize whatever he was trying to say. At last he heaved a deep sigh and said, "I think you're *all* crazy! Come on, Hilda; when Illya gets an idea like this in his head there's no reasoning with him."

As they closed the door behind them, they heard Hanevitch's voice saying, "Now, Mr. Kuryakin, what precisely was the cause of your leaving Russia?" Napoleon would have given a great deal to hear the answer, but Hilda had his sleeve and was stronger than she looked.

* * *

"What time is it, Napoleon?" asked Hilda, as she looked around the room where the U.N.C.L.E. agents would be staying.

"A few minutes short of eleven," he answered, checking his watch. "Why?"

"I just wondered," she said slowly. "It feels like midnight."

They had come into the room only a few minutes before, Hilda carrying one bag and Napoleon carrying two from the car, which had been left behind the *Satul Contru*. The room was on the third story of a large inn which must have dated back to a period of greater travel in the mountains. The ceiling was low and slanted, and the beds were large and soft, with heavy down comforters. A heavy silver pitcher of water stood in a matching bowl on the dresser, with a glass beside it: Gheorghe had been appraised of his guests' importance, and had brought out a family heirloom for their especial use. Hilda mentioned this to Napoleon, who made a note to be unusually grateful. There was also a modern table with two chairs in the center of the room, flimsy by comparison with the sturdily-built furnishings which matched the wood-raftered decor.

Napoleon didn't need to ask what she had meant by her remark that it felt like midnight. He had felt ill-at-ease since coming into the room, but he put it down to accumulated tiredness and the strangeness of the surroundings. He shook his head to clear it, and poured himself a glass of water.

He wandered around the room sipping at it, while Hilda flopped into one of chairs and watched. She tried to look relaxed, but her hand gripping the arm of the chair quivered with nervous tension. Napoleon felt it too—an unreasoning panic slowly growing inside him. He remembered a gas that caused blind fear like this in its victims, and went to the window. He threw the casement open and breathed deeply of the cold, sharp night air. It woke him up somewhat, but did nothing to ease his agitation.

He closed the window again and latched it securely, then strolled back towards Hilda. "Look," he said, as he set his empty glass down on the table.

"It's late, and you've been under a terrific strain. I suggest strongly that you go back to your room, lock the door, and sleep till noon. You'll feel a lot better."

Somewhere a tall clock began chiming. "It's eleven o'clock," he continued, glancing at his watch. "We can discuss..."

Hilda held up her hand, listening. The clock chimed ten, eleven—and twelve. She looked up at him. "Did you set your watch ahead when you crossed the border?"

He thought. "Illya reminded me," he said, "but did I? I don't think I..."

Hilda's hand jumped for his wrist and grabbed it hard. She was staring past him, eyes wide with fear. Her mouth opened slowly, and she said in a strange whisper, "Napoleon—*look at the glass on the table*."

He turned, gently disengaging her hand, and looked. The glass he had just drunk from was crawling slowly across the top of the table. He stared at it in disbelief for a few seconds, and then reached out almost unwillingly as it approached the table's edge. He picked it up and looked at it, then set it down in the center of the table again. Immediately it began to move toward the edge. Not fast, but quite visibly. Hilda was shrinking back in her chair, staring with horrified fascination at it. Napoleon picked it up again, then quickly looked under the table. It was too light to have any kind of mechanism concealed inside it, practically cardboard and lath. He started to say, "There's a perfectly logical explanation..." But his voice failed him, and he swallowed hard.

The thought in his mind was *Why is it moving?*, but the only feeling in his stomach was primitive fear. He fought to control it. With a shaking hand he reached for the water pitcher. "Let's see if whatever it is can move half a pound of water," he said almost conversationally. Then Hilda screamed.

Napoleon could see the room behind him weirdly distorted in the bright surface of the pitcher—the light walls and the black curved rectangles of the windows. And there was something moving outside the windows.

Something so distorted by the curvature of the metal he couldn't tell what it was.

He whirled on his toes and cocked his arm. In a fraction of a second he saw a black shape standing just outside the window, and his mind photographed it: almost as tall as one window and with a wingspread as wide as both, and with a face almost human but unbelievably baleful glaring into the bright light of the room. Then Napoleon hurled the pitcher with all his strength and the glass exploded outward in a shattering burst of sparkling shards.

A moment later there was the sound of a shot from below. Napoleon opened his eyes again, and realized he had closed them just as he had thrown the pitcher. He ran to the window, and looked down twenty-five feet to the muddy street below. He looked up into the darkness. There was no sound, and only the feel of a vagrant breeze stroked his cheek with a clammy finger.

He looked down again, and saw Illya standing, legs apart and braced, gun in hand, looking up at him.

"What did you see?" Napoleon asked.

"I don't know," countered Illya. "What do you think *you* saw?"

Napoleon shook his head. "I don't want to say right out loud because I didn't get more than a glimpse of it. I couldn't identify it in a lineup." But as he spoke the picture came to him, as sharp and clear as a studio photograph, of a face in the midst of the floating, flapping blackness, just outside a third-story window with no balcony....

"Come on up," he said. "And if you see Gheorghe, ask him for something to cover this window. No, forget it. We'll take another room. Oh, if you see a pitcher down there, bring it up."

Ninety seconds later Illya tapped at the door and Napoleon opened it. "Find it?" he asked.

Illya slipped his automatic back into its holster. "We can look for it in the morning," he said. "Is Hilda all right?"

"She's coming around. Now, tell me before she comes to—what do you think you shot at?"

"I don't know. I looked up when I heard the glass shatter, and I saw something outside the window. I know it didn't go down the side of the building or over onto the roof, because I saw it go *away* from the wall as if it was jumping, but then it went up into the dark."

"Illya, *what do you think you shot at?*"

The Russian agent sat down heavily and looked at the back of his hands. "Napoleon, we've been friends for a long time. You know I am not given to hallucinations or to letting my imagination run away with me."

"Yes...."

Illya looked up. "And don't mention this in our report—but *it looked like a huge bat*."

Section II: "Werewolves Can't Climb Trees."

Chapter 5: "Good Lord, Illya—What Was That?"

It should cause relatively little surprise that neither Napoleon nor Illya slept particularly soundly that night. The innkeeper was quick and efficient about transferring them to another room, and made no comment about his valued heirloom being thrown through a window and left in the mud of the street all night. He also showed no inclination to go outside to search for it. "There will be time enough for that in the morning," he said. "My friends are honest, and know to whom it belongs if they find it."

After he had left, there was a brief debate with Hilda, who absolutely refused to return to her own room.

"I don't care what you tell New York," she said, "and I don't care what Gheorghe thinks—I'm spending the night on your sofa. I know what I saw at the window, and I know I won't sleep a wink if I'm alone."

Illya remained aloof from the discussion, and reappeared after a few minutes' absence dressed in pajamas of a plain dark blue. "And I know what I think I saw," he said. "But I refuse to allow it to interfere with my rest. If you two insist on arguing the night away, please do it in lower tones."

He climbed into bed, pulled up the covers, and turned his back to them. Napoleon and Hilda looked at him for a few seconds, and then Napoleon heaved a deep sigh of resignation. "All right," he said. "It's your reputation. If there wasn't a third party here as witness..."

"You wouldn't be nearly so hesitant," said Hilda, with an impish grin as her apprehension lessened. "Come with me back to my room while I get a few things."

"And leave me here all alone?" came Illya's muffled voice from the bed.

"Don't worry," said Napoleon comfortingly, "I'll leave the light on for you."

Then he ducked quickly to one side as a pillow flew across the room and slapped against the door.

* * *

A discrete tap at the same place several hours later announced that breakfast was being prepared, and some fifteen minutes after that the three descended the stairs, freshly dressed and looking ready for anything under the sun. Under the moon might be a different matter.

There was no discussion of last night's occurrences over the breakfast sausages and eggs. The conversation moved around local customs and traditions, and only faltered for a few seconds when Gheorghe silently poured fresh milk for them from a freshly cleaned and polished silver pitcher which Napoleon recognized.

At last, over coffee, they got down to the business of the day.

"I could draw you a sketch map," said Hilda, "but I couldn't show you the exact spot except in person."

"How far away is it?" asked Illya.

"A little over a mile from the outskirts of the village. He was running in this direction."

Napoleon frowned. "I suppose the place will be all trampled by curious villagers by this time."

"I don't think so. These people have better things to do with their time than wander about in the woods. And they have lately been more cautious than usual. In fact, I would be surprised if anyone from the village had been near the spot where Carl was found. They consider it a place of ill omen."

"It was for Carl," said Illya.

"When will you be ready to show us the place?" Napoleon asked.

"Any time. The spot's fairly close to the road; if you have any sort of detecting gear to carry or want to avoid a long walk in the forest, we can drive."

"Beats a long walk carrying my magnifying glass. How about you?" Napoleon turned to Illya.

"For myself, I can take nature or leave it alone. The car will probably be quicker, unless the road winds."

"Not that much. I can drive you there in five or ten minutes."

"Make it fifteen," said Napoleon. "I've got to get my pipe and deerstalker hat out of my trunk. If we're going to play detective, I may as well look the part."

* * *

The lumbering old Poboda took the rutted dirt road with only a few complaints, and eight bumpy minutes after leaving the garage behind the City Hall Hilda pulled to a stop in a wide area. There was enough space for a cart to pass, but not much more.

The trees were not thick—perhaps ten feet apart. There was little underbrush. The forest had a well-kept feeling to it, and an almost park-like appearance. There was only the slightest wind breathing among the upper branches of the pines, and the occasional note of a bird rang distantly like a dropped coin.

Napoleon and Illya felt the quiet of the place pressing softly in around them, and even the warm morning sunshine seemed a little chill. Hilda broke the silence.

"This way," she said. "Just over that little rise."

She pointed the tree out to them from a fair distance away, and described without a trace of emotion her own deductions as to the last few minutes of Carl Endros' life.

"He broke out of the underbrush about there," she said, pointing. "I was able to back-trail him about half a mile, and found no indications of anyone or anything on his track. No footprints of any kind."

"What about right around the body?" asked Illya.

"None that I could see. The ground was scuffed up close to the base of the tree, and I couldn't read many signs. I could see where he had tripped over the tree root and dragged himself to where his back was protected, but I couldn't tell whether there were any footprints close to him. There were certainly none approaching."

"Could they have stepped in his footprints?" Napoleon suggested hesitantly, half afraid it would sound foolish.

It did. Hilda regarded him scornfully. "Really, Mr. Solo," she said. "Even if they had been wearing the same type and size of shoes, it is practically impossible to step *exactly* in an existing footprint. Try it with a print of your own. There will almost always be a double impression of some kind. And while you might match one or even two, ten or twelve consecutive prints would be most unlikely. Especially since they must have rushed him as he was shooting."

"Oh yes," said Illya. "Shooting. Have you checked the trees for slugs? If he emptied his gun, they must have gone somewhere."

"I've made a cursory examination of the nearer trees," she said, "but haven't had the time for a careful and detailed search. Why?"

"A relatively undamaged bullet may give us an indication of where it has been," said Illya. "Whether it bounced off something, hit nothing but the tree in which it stopped, or passed through something, and whether that something was flesh and blood or not. It could be most interesting."

* * *

They returned to the village shortly past mid-day, for lunch and rest. Several dozen trees had been examined, and two possible bullet holes found. In both cases the slugs, if slugs there were, were buried too deep for casual extraction with a pocket knife, and would have to be dug out by stronger methods. There was a small hand-axe in one of their boxes of equipment which should prove itself equal to the task, and with which they planned to return after refreshing themselves.

They were seated on the porch of the inn awaiting their *ciorba*, and sipping at a local white wine, when the sound of voices raised in anger came along the street to them.

"I wonder what that is," said Napoleon with slight interest.

"Sounds like a small riot," Illya suggested.

Hilda looked doubtful. "A riot? In Pokol? I don't believe it."

"We shall soon see," said Illya. "It sounds as if it's coming this way."

And a few seconds later a tall slender man, dressed in a black suit of formal and slightly old-fashioned cut, hurried around the corner, casting glances over his shoulder. As he approached the inn, he slowed and looked up. It took Napoleon a few seconds to recognize him as Zoltan, whom they had helped in a similar situation in Budapest some five days ago. He poked Illya.

"It's Zoltan," he said. "Our friend from Budapest. Looks like whatever he does, he did it again. Should we wade in and help him out, or figure if it happens this often maybe he deserves it?"

"We can accomplish little here without the coöperation and trust of the people of the village," said Illya. "Let us see what happens if we don't take a hand."

There was a larger crowd after Zoltan this time—some twenty men and women were following him, many of them waving scythes or brooms. Zoltan was still a good thirty feet ahead of them as he gained the steps of the inn, mounted half-way up them, and turned to face the crowd. He raised his arms, and they stopped.

"My countrymen," he addressed them in Rumanian, "your suspicions of me are understandable. You know the old stories and you have seen the old spirits walking in the forests. But I am one of God's children, like you. And if there is any man among you who questions my true nature, let him come with his friends to the church this afternoon when the bell tolls the hour of one, and let him apologize before the altar to me and my family."

There was a mutter from the crowd, and some of them moved a step forward, but Zoltan stood firm.

"The church, within the hour," he repeated. "I wish to remain in this village for some time, and I want no one here to consider me an enemy or to walk in fear."

Without waiting for a response, he turned and went up onto the porch. He seemed about to walk past them into the inn, so Napoleon greeted him quietly:

"Good afternoon. I believe we met in Budapest a few days ago."

The thin aristocratic features turned in their direction, and then softened into a smile of recognition. "Ah, yes," he said in English. "Mr. Solo and Mr. Kuryakin, of New York, America. I had half expected to find you here. I don't believe I know your charming female companion."

Hilda smiled up at him prettily, and Illya performed the introductions. "Hilda Eclary, this is Zoltan...ah..." He looked up at their guest. "I don't believe you ever gave us your last name."

A brief smile flickered across his thin face. "I'm certain I didn't. It is not given lightly."

Napoleon hooked a fourth chair with an outstretched leg and dragged it to the table. "Well, why not sit down and have a glass of wine, and tell us your life story."

"I cannot partake of wine or any other food for an hour or more, my friend, but at half past the hour of one I will be more than pleased to accept your invitation. You see, at one o'clock I must take holy communion in the church, or I cannot rest in this town."

Napoleon and Hilda looked at each other, and then they looked at Zoltan. Before they could phrase the questions that were bubbling in their minds, Zoltan raised a slim, well-manicured hand. "My name will answer all your questions," he said. "I am the heir to a no-longer existent title, and the last son of a noble and aristocratic family. But my name is a curse which has followed me around the world." He looked them over, and said in a perfectly level voice, "I am Count Zoltan Dracula."

* * *

At twenty minutes past one, Napoleon and Illya stood outside the little Orthodox church where they had just watched, with most of the population of the village, as Zoltan Dracula said the words of prayer, kissed the silver cross of the priest, and took communion. No man in Pokol could have been found willing to admit he had thought it impossible, but several had stayed behind to shake Zoltan's hand and apologize, though they didn't say for what.

"Well," said Illya as they started for the door, "there's one we don't have to worry about."

Napoleon looked oddly at his partner. "Worry about what?"

"Never mind, Napoleon. There's just one we don't have to worry about, that's all."

Colonel Hanevitch was one of the few absent from the ceremony, but he met Napoleon and Illya as they came out of the cool darkness of the church

into the bright mountain sunlight. Illya greeted him.

"Good afternoon, *Colonel*. Did you miss the mass?"

"Of course not. I am a good atheistic Communist, and I have no time to spare for these peasant superstitions." He paused. "I presume nothing...untoward happened?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"The ceremony was unmarred by any...unusual occurrences, and was completed properly?"

"Of course," said Illya with a slightly raised eyebrow. "Did you expect anything to happen?"

"Oh, certainly not, certainly not," said the *Colonel* hastily. "I was simply inquiring of politeness. And I came only to speak to *Domn* Dracula about his plans while here. He has no legal standing, you understand, except as an expatriate visitor; his title is meaningless."

"And his name?" asked Illya softly.

"Is merely a name," said the *Colonel* definitely. "If the people choose to attach meanings to it, my only duty is to protect our visitor from the results of their misinterpretations."

"I don't think there is much danger of that," said Napoleon, as Zoltan came out between the tall wooden doors, surrounded by well-wishers, and with Hilda right behind him.

He raised a hand to hail the U.N.C.L.E. agents as he approached, then turned to the crowd. "My people," he said. "I hold no ill-will. I ask only that in the future you remember this—a name alone holds no evil. Now my blessing on you all. Return to your work." And obediently they were gone.

Zoltan turned to *Colonel* Hanevitch. "You wished to speak with me, I believe? Food has not passed my lips today, and while my soul is strengthened, my body is weak. Could we speak at the inn, over *ciorba* and *mititei*?"

They did. Napoleon had remembered something though, and opened the conversation before the *Colonel* had a chance to speak.

"I seem to remember the Dracula family actually died out in 1658," he said without preamble.

"Yes," said Illya. "But not in the south."

"Quite correct," said Zoltan. "There were originally two brothers, Dan and Dragul, who founded rival lines in the 13th Century; lines which were not to merge until almost 1600. But when Constantine Sherban died childless in 1658, the title devolved to a distant relative, my seven-times-great grandfather, Petru. The family name was Stobolzny, but the title *Voivode Drakula* became part of the family heritage. At the time, it was not politically expedient to have this known, and the documents were hidden. Then they were lost, and not found again until the castle was rebuilt in 1897. We were ready to reëstablish our title when that accursed Englishman, Stoker, chose to make the name of Dracula known to the world as the name of a demon.

"My grandfather thought it beneath his dignity to sue, and besides, the damage had been done. But in this modern and rational age, I thought, there would be no real belief in the terrors of the darker parts of our past. So, proud of the true heritage of my family title, I took the name which was rightfully mine. And since then I have defended its honor in every country in Europe. Now I have returned to the home of my people. The castle where I played as a child has been taken over by strangers; my title is meaningless. But the people still know me, and I know the land. I have money—perhaps I can ransom my castle from those who now hold it, and live in my home again."

He took a large bite of sausage and followed it with a hearty swallow of wine. "And there you have my story," he said. "*Colonel* Hanevitch, have you any questions?"

There was silence for perhaps a count of ten, and then the *Colonel* rose stiffly to his feet. "I remember your father well. You know the present situation, and I feel you can be trusted not to infringe upon it." His face softened as the trace of a smile rose under his discipline. "And may I say, welcome home, *Voivode Drakula*." And he turned on his heel and marched away.

Illya looked after him with mild surprise, and murmured, "You know, I may have been wrong about the *Colonel*. Perhaps he is human, after all."

* * *

The afternoon was more than half gone when Napoleon and Illya returned to the spot in the woods where Carl's bloodless body had been found. A radio check with Geneva had established Zoltan's *bona fides*, and Hilda had stayed behind to enlist his aid in their investigation. Meanwhile, they had field work to occupy their time.

They carried with them small hand-axes and large hunting knives, and after parking the car just off the road and walking to the scene of the crime they set about attacking a group of nearby trees with these weapons.

Careful examination had revealed bullet scars in these trees, and there was a chance that the jacketed slugs could have been left relatively undamaged by their flight, and that something might be learned from them.

But the trees were hardwood, and the job was slow and tiring. The first slug retrieved had apparently glanced off another tree and then lodged against a knot; little identifiable remained of it.

It took almost an hour to find another bullet hole. By this time the second slug had been extracted and was found to be in reasonably good shape. Both men went to work on the third tree.

Gradually Napoleon became aware that it was growing increasingly hard to see. The sun had dropped behind the mountain peak to the west some time ago, but now the light was fading rapidly. In a few more minutes it would be dark. As he looked up from his work, a sound like a chiming clock directly over his head made him start.

Illya looked up for a moment, then bent to his work again. "A dwarf owl," he said. "A startling sound if you don't expect it." He straightened and rubbed his eyes. "I seem to remember a flashlight in the car. We can have this out in another fifteen minutes, if we can see what we're doing."

He slipped his knife back into its sheath and started off. "Come on," he said to Napoleon. "In these woods at night, it takes two people to carry a flashlight."

"Is that an old folk saying?"

"No, I just made it up. But do you deny its truth?"

Napoleon laughed briefly, but he came along.

At the road, they looked up and down in the deepening twilight. "It must be some other part of the road," Napoleon suggested doubtfully.

"We left it right over there," said Illya, pointing. "See the stump by the wide place? That's where we parked. I remember it clearly because I put the front fender right next to it."

Napoleon followed him over to the stump, and held a cigarette lighter while he examined the ground closely. "The road is too hard to hold tracks," said the Russian to himself. "But here's the wheel-mark next to the stump. It ends here, too."

Solo bent and looked where Illya's finger pointed. There was a depression the size and shape of the tire-tread running in from the road and ending by the stump—the car could have been backed out by someone, but they had not heard the motor, and the Poboda was not well-muffled.

He straightened and shrugged. "It's been stolen," he said. "Looks like we hike back to the village and tell the *Colonel* we've been the victims of a simple old-fashioned car theft."

"I hope it's that simple," said Illya. "I've long ago learned that true coincidence is a very rare thing. There may be some sort of trouble tonight before we get back to Pokol."

Napoleon was about to ask a foolish question, when the darkness was shaken by a long anguished wail which seem to come from somewhere up the road. He stopped with his mouth open as the silence softly flooded back in upon them. Then he almost whispered, "Good Lord, Illya. What was that?"

A moment later the howl was repeated—this time in the woods directly behind them, sounding less than a hundred feet away.

In the silence that followed, Illya's voice said quietly, "I'd hate to guess, since wolves are supposed to be rare in these mountains. But I think I can definitely say that is not a dwarf owl."

Chapter 6: "My Pets Seem To Be Restive Tonight."

They started slowly along the road towards town, keeping in the center of the road, and had gone a hundred paces before each realized he was holding his U.N.C.L.E. Special automatic loosely in his hand. It was quite dark now, and a fog had blown down from the mountains above them. The temperature was dropping too—Napoleon was glad for the heavy overcoat he had thought to bring along.

Neither one of them spoke. Both were aware it was about two miles to the village, and they were equally aware that if they stayed on the road it would take them about half an hour. If they wandered off the road they would be lost, probably for the whole night.

They had gone almost a quarter mile in absolute silence. Not even the sound of a night bird penetrated the fog. And then both stopped and raised

their guns instantly as another howl came out of the darkness ahead of them. And as they stopped, they heard a soft sound behind them—a padding of soft feet and the heavy breathing of a large animal.

Napoleon spun around, but could see nothing. He said so. Illya did not answer, but pointed. The shapes of the trees were dimly visible on either side of the road, and as they looked, something large and gray moved across a space and disappeared again.

"We seem to be cut off," he murmured. "A pack is hunting tonight."

"Would it help to climb a tree?" asked Napoleon uncertainly.

"It might. But if you will notice, the pines large enough to support your weight do not branch until some twelve feet above the ground. My athletic skills do not include the high jump."

They looked about them for a moment. The sounds behind them on the road stopped, then came cautiously closer. Another blood-chilling howl sounded in front of them, and another to their left.

"Let's go this way," said Napoleon impetuously, pointing right.

"Leave the road?" said Illya doubtfully.

"I'd rather be lost for the night than permanently," said Napoleon. "We have eight rounds each in these rods, and I wouldn't want to count on them being enough to discourage our furry friends out there."

"I think I see your point," said Illya, and they stepped off the road.

Almost at once they were surrounded by pitch blackness. Napoleon could avoid bumping into trees by walking cautiously and keeping his hands extended. He could usually spot a tree a few feet away as a lump of darker black, but it was a risky business. City-bred eyes do not adjust to absolute darkness easily.

Then there was a dim yellow glow near him. Illya was holding a small pen-light, and directing its feeble beam on the ground ahead of them. His voice came softly from behind it. "I just remembered I had this clipped in my inside pocket. The battery is low, but it may help."

"It does. I think we've lost the..."

There was a whine and a snuffling sound a short distance behind them, followed by two howls, almost simultaneous, from either side. "Don't look now," said Illya, "but I think we're being followed."

They used the pen-light sparingly from then on, and communicated as little as possible. Once Napoleon tripped over a tree-root and fell sprawling, and it took thirty seconds or more for them to find his gun, which had flown from his hand and landed in a pile of leaves.

But every time they stopped to listen, there were sounds behind them in the night. Once or twice they heard soft sounds of dried leaves being crushed beneath the feet of some heavy animal, and once, while they were searching for a way through a tangle of brush, Illya's light caught a pair of slitted green eyes no more than twenty feet away—eyes which faded back into the darkness among the trees even as they looked, and were gone before Napoleon could bring his automatic to bear.

Then, after an unguessable length of time, he felt something solid under his feet. He was just about to comment on it when Illya's light flicked on, and then off again. In the brief moment of illumination, they saw it was a path—bare, brown and winding. As they looked at each other in the dark, something snuffled in the brush just ahead of them and to the right. Illya whispered, "Let's go left—and stay on the path."

They could tell the way by the feel of the ground underfoot when they wandered off the path, and a moment of dim light would put them right again. The noises in the night stayed behind them and to both sides as they hurried along, and gradually the path began to rise. It turned oftener, too, and soon they were starting up a fairly steep hill.

Then suddenly there was a patch of something against the grassy side of the hill. Illya's light danced over it, and vanished into a small cave. Just then there was a soft, menacing growl just ahead of them.

Illya said quickly, "This looks like a cozy place to spend the night. It also has a conveniently narrow mouth. After you."

They stepped inside, ducking under the low ridge of rock that guarded the entrance. Illya shone his light around, and saw only the rough walls of natural stone. There was no indication of occupancy other than an ancient burned area on the floor just inside the entrance. The back of the cave, rough and convoluted, could be seen dimly just within the limits of the beam.

"Got any wood?" asked Napoleon. "A fire would go well right now."

"Wood's right outside," said Illya. "If you want a fire, you have my full permission to gather the fuel for it."

Napoleon looked thoughtfully out at the night. "Should have collected a few sticks as we came along," he said. "Well, I think under the circumstances we can get along without one...."

He listened for a while. There were no more sounds outside—the pack had either gone on or was waiting. After a minute or two he said, "On the other hand, we both need to sleep eventually. Maybe if I just went to the nearest tree and..."

He looked outside and stopped. There seemed to be something out there. More than something—some things. He held out his hand, and wordlessly Illya placed the pen-light in it.

In the faint yellow glow, there were twenty or thirty shaggy gray shapes standing in a half-circle some twenty feet away, green eyes catching the light and glittering like emeralds. Gradually they began moving in on the mouth of the cave.

"On the other hand," he continued very softly, "there are definite advantages to staying in the cave, even without a fire."

"The mouth is narrow," said Illya. "We can shoot them as fast as they come in—if the bullets will affect them."

Napoleon looked at his partner with an expression which was lost in the darkness, perhaps fortunately for both of them. But before he could frame a comment, a third voice spoke softly out of the blackness of the cave behind them. "That should not be necessary, gentlemen," it said in Rumanian.

It said a great deal for both Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin that neither of them dropped their guns or fired at the sound. Napoleon did take several seconds to bring up the light and direct it into the dead-end of the cave, but his hand was steady as he did so.

The faint spot slithered across the uneven floor, and paused on a pair of shiny black boots. After a moment it crept up the front of a black cloak wrapped about the tall figure who stood there, his back to a solid rock wall. The light stopped on the white face above the cloak, which stood out against the darkness like the luminescence of a rotting tree stump.

His eyes narrowed against the dim light, but after a moment he took a slow soundless step forward and spoke again. "*Iertati-ma*. I beg pardon—my pets are unusually restive tonight. If you will permit me..."

Neither Napoleon nor Illya felt like contesting his right of way as he moved toward the cave entrance. He passed between them and they looked out as he stood in the door facing the circle of fangs, which was now almost close enough to touch. He raised his arms, and the full black cloak hung from them like leathery wings as he faced the wolves and said in a soft but ringing voice, "Not yet, my dear ones. It is not yet time."

And then, without a growl or another sound, the wolves turned as one and vanished into the forest. He stood a few more seconds, then slowly lowered his arms, and gathered his cloak about him before turning to face the U.N.C.L.E. agents again. He stepped back into the cave as he said, "My

sincere apologies for this...incident. When you leave, take that path. It will lead you to your automobile. I suggest you return directly to the village."

He stepped aside to let them pass him. Napoleon looked doubtfully at Illya and murmured in English, "But the wolves might just be..."

"Let's *go*, Napoleon," said Illya in a fierce whisper, and started out. Napoleon followed him, noticing that his automatic was still in his hand, and slipped it back into its holster.

Just as he stepped through the entrance behind Illya, Napoleon thought of something and turned around. "*Multumesc*," he said. "Thank you for the..." He stopped as the glow from the pen-light swept around the barren rock walls of the sides and back of the empty cave.

* * *

They found their car as promised at the end of the path, waiting as if it had been there all along. The fog was thinner, and a few stars were visible to give them the direction to the village. It was only shortly after 10:00 P.M. when they pulled up behind *Satul Contru*.

Colonel Hanevitch was in his office as usual, and his voice answered their knock with a cheerful invitation to enter. When he saw them he put down his pen and stood up.

"Solo and Kuryakin! I suggest you telephone the inn at once. *Domnisoara* Eclary has been most concerned as to your whereabouts." He indicated a bulky telephone on his desk, and, as Illya placed the call with the sleepy operator, added, "I think you can understand her apprehension."

"Believe me," said Napoleon, "we were not entirely free of apprehension ourselves."

"Quite so," said Illya. "And this is the reason we came directly to you." He turned back to the telephone and spoke soothingly to Hilda, as Hanevitch raised an eyebrow or two at Napoleon.

"Well," he began, "we were digging the bullets out of the trees where Carl was found, when it got dark. We started back to the car to get the flash..."

Illya had hung up the telephone long before the story was finished, and added a few corroborative touches to the narrative.

Colonel Hanevitch listened politely all the way through, making no comment by word or expression. When they finished, he leaned slowly back in his swivel chair, which creaked sharply beneath him. He looked over his folded hands at them, and shook his head slowly.

"Your reputations are well known as honorable," he said. "You would have no imaginable reason for coming to me with so fantastic a story—and you would not create such a lie. If you *were* to lie, it would at least be a logical and believable lie. Therefore I have no choice but to believe that this is truly what you think happened. What *actually* happened, I must reserve judgment on. Perhaps you were drugged and hypnotized into remembering all these things. But wolves are very rare in this part of the mountains—and seeing twenty or thirty of them all together..." He shrugged, expressively. "As for the cave—do you think you could find it again?"

"I think so," said Illya. "I could find the path and follow it back from where we picked up the car."

"That might be worth doing," said the *Colonel*. "Perhaps footprints, or other clues, might avail themselves to a careful search—in full daylight, of course."

"Of course," said Illya automatically.

"Did you get a clear look at your rescuer?"

"Fairly clear," said Napoleon. "He walked close enough to us that his cloak brushed against me, and I had the pen-light on him at the time."

"Do you think you would recognize him?"

"Yes," said Napoleon definitely. "It was a...well, an *unusual* face. It was a very long oval shape, heavy-lidded eyes, high thin nose, thin dark lips, high cheek-bones, bushy eyebrows..."

"Did he look anything like your friend Zoltan?"

Napoleon thought. "Not as tall, and thinner. The face shape was similar, and the nose was the same."

The *Colonel* turned in his swivel chair and reached up to a small shelf for a dusty leatherbound book. Gold lettering was stamped deep into its cracked dark red spine. He opened it on the desk before him, and leafed through it, stopping at a double page of small oval portraits. He spun the book to face Illya and Napoleon. "Do you recognize any of these pictures?"

They studied the faces in the book for a while, and then Napoleon said, "Yes. I see one."

"Which?"

"Just a minute. I want to see if Illya picks the same one."

Illya looked very carefully at a few of the portraits, then nodded slowly. "Yes. Yes, beyond a doubt. This one, Napoleon."

Solo nodded as his friend's finger touched a face in the book. It was the face they had seen in the cave, above a cloak the color of the night, apologizing for his pets.

Hanevitch rose slightly, and looked at the book as they turned back to him and pointed. He nodded slowly. "I was afraid of that," he said. "This is the *Vlad* Tsepesh Stobolzny, five-times-great-grandfather of Zoltan Dracula. He is believed to have died in 1704, but there were rumors he was a demon, and the village did not rest easy for many years. He left his men while on a hunt in the forest, and disappeared. His trail ended in a pool of blood, with other tracks leaving. Mr. Solo, they were the footprints of a gigantic wolf."

Chapter 7: "Oh-oh, Here Comes Zoltan."

Zoltan appeared beside the table the following morning as Napoleon, Illya and Hilda were addressing themselves to breakfast, and offered his condolences on their nerve-shattering experience of the night before. He seemed concerned, and Hilda invited him to join them.

"I told him last night," she explained, "as soon as Illya called from *Satul Contru*. And I told him this morning whose picture you recognized."

Zoltan frowned and nodded. "Yes," he said. "My five-times-great-grandfather, the *Vlad* Tsepesh. He was the grandson of Petru, on whom the name of Dracula devolved in 1658. According to family tradition, it was he who was responsible for the loss of the documentation of our title. He was a cruel and wicked man, and met a death fitting to his manner of life."

"Look," said Napoleon after a pause. "Illya, you're going to be looking for that cave today, and Hilda will be helping you. I'd like to run down to Brasov, to check through the records on the castle of Zoltan's. See if there's anything odd about its present ownership."

"I had intended to start my queries here in Pokol," said Zoltan, "but if you would like to have a companion in your researches, I would be most happy to accompany you."

"As a matter of fact, that's what I had in mind. You know the language better than I do, and you can go places I can't and get questions answered. As long as you don't tell people your real name..."

Zoltan's eyebrows drew together slightly, and his lips thinned. "I bear my name proudly," he said. "I do not give it to those who do not need it, but I would never deny it. Besides, this is..."

"... a rational country?" asked Napoleon. "You aren't even fooling yourself on that one. This country is no more rational than anyplace else on Earth that has people in it. And if you want to go around looking for trouble, I'm going to start letting you get yourself out of it, too."

Zoltan smiled slightly. "I have done well enough in the past."

"Okay. It's up to you. But when they're trying to drive a stake through your heart, don't look at me. You could be bad for my reputation."

* * *

As Hilda and Illya went off to borrow Gheorghe's horse-drawn cart for the trip into the forest, Napoleon and Zoltan fueled up the big black Poboda and started down the narrow winding mountain road towards the main highway which led to Brasov, some forty miles north.

It was shortly past noon when they arrived in the city, and not quite an hour later when they found the office of records and the city library. Zoltan, being Rumanian, was less likely to be held up by red tape in his examination of the history of Castle Stobolzny since his grandfather had sold it, before his death in 1939. Napoleon, therefore, went to the library.

The goal of his search was any written material on vampirism in the local area, including case histories; specifically those connected with the Stobolzny family, and even more specifically anything at all to do with the *Vlad* Tsepesh.

The custodian of the books on folklore and history—the two subjects are inextricably intermingled in this part of the world—led him to a reading room. The ceiling was almost lost in the shadows, and dust motes made the shaft of sunlight coming in from a high window seem solid enough to climb. She brought him a stack of material pertaining to the subjects he requested, and told him in a low voice that the other volumes on the vampiric legends were in use by the gentleman over there.

Napoleon's gaze followed her pointing finger and found, in the shadows next to the spot of sunlight, the figure of a man, bent over two or three volumes. A notebook could be seen beside him, and he seemed to be recording material copiously.

"I am sure he would be willing to share his books with you, sir," she said. "He is an American, like yourself." She shook her head. "I do not understand what your people find so interesting in stories made up by old women to frighten their grandchildren. Please leave the books at the front office when you have finished." And she disappeared into the shadows.

Napoleon carried his books over towards the sunspot, and quietly took a seat across from the other American. He was about Solo's height, but heavier. He seemed deeply engrossed in his books, and did not look up. At last Napoleon cleared his throat, and said, "I beg your pardon...."

The American looked up with slight surprise, and Napoleon continued, "Our researches seem to be overlapping. May I look at the books you've finished with?"

"Well, sure," said the other. "Golly, I didn't expect to run into another American here. Uh, how's your Rumanian?"

"Good enough. Having trouble?"

"Here and there, none at the moment. I've been using this dictionary to get me over the rough spots." He rubbed his eyes and squinted. "What brings you here after awful things like werewolves and vampires?"

Napoleon was instantly alert. "Sort of an investigation," he said cautiously. "What about you?"

The man smiled. With the light mustache and slightly receding hairline, he resembled a fuller-faced Vincent Price, but without the comic villainy affected by the actor. "My work," he said. "I specialize in horror films. Just came from Trieste, and a sci-fi film festival. I took the opportunity to stop off in Transylvania on my way north, and collect some facts on real monsters."

"You make horror movies?"

"No, just write about them. I run a magazine devoted to the subject—*Famous Monsters of Filmland*. And a quarter of a million readers consider me to be the world's greatest authority on monsters, vampires, ghouls and werewolves—not to mention spaceships, mutants, time machines, and anything else you can think of that Hollywood has ever used to scare audiences. And believe me, it takes a lot of work to keep up with my reputation. That's what I'm doing now." He indicated the books open around him.

Napoleon nodded. "Maybe we could be of help to each other," he said. "My name is Napoleon Solo."

The other man smiled in pleasant surprise. "You don't say! You work for U.N.C.L.E., don't you? I've heard a little bit about you. Do you really think I could help you out? Don't tell me you're investigating a werewolf or..." His eyes and mouth opened wide as something hit. "Oh! I remember! Is it the vampire murders up in the mountains a month or so ago? I heard some rumors at the film festival about them."

Napoleon hesitated, then nodded. This amiable American seemed to know an unusual amount for a casually met tourist. But he could be checked out with New York, and if he was an expert on vampires, he could definitely come in handy. "Yes, that's it, Mr....ah..."

"Ackerman. Forrest J Ackerman—no period on the J. But call me Forry. Tell me all about them—but first tell me if I can publish it."

"I'm afraid not. Besides, I don't think you would like something this real. It's not nearly as much fun as in the movies." He glanced at his watch. "We can talk later. We only have three and a half hours until the library closes. Let me give you a quick rundown on what we want to know now, and we can go through some of these books with it in mind."

He didn't dare tell Ackerman about their experience in the woods the night before, but he mentioned the *Vlad* Tsepesh and said he had been seen around the village by reliable witnesses, which was certainly true.

The spot of sunlight moved along the table while they talked and worked over the great dusty volumes of history, and was starting up the wall at the end of the room when the librarian came back in with a little bell to warn them that closing time was almost upon them.

They found rumors and old stories dating back two hundred and sixty years to the death of the *Vlad* Tsepesh, stories which linked him with a pack of wolves which would harry his prey through the forest until it dropped from exhaustion, after which he would swoop down in the form of a giant bat and suck its blood. Ackerman knew of similar legends from all over Europe, and was able to put many aspects of the stories into perspective as part of the folk traditions of the Balkans.

It was getting towards dusk as they stepped out into the parklike area surrounding the public buildings of Brasov. Forry and Napoleon walked side by side down the broad stone steps, and Solo looked around for Zoltan.

There was no sign of him. The night guard at the Hall of Records remembered him from a description, but said he had left when the Hall closed about an hour ago. He had asked about the library's hours, and presumably had gone there. Napoleon shook his head.

"Who's your friend?" Forry asked. "Somebody else from U.N.C.L.E.?"

"No," said Napoleon. "He's Rumanian. A Count, as a matter of fact. I think you'd be interested in meeting him."

"A genuine Rumanian Count? I sure would! Golly, my monster-fans will be surprised when I tell them about this. Er—I can tell them about meeting him, can't I?"

"That'll be up to him. But you have no idea how surprised they'll be." He looked around the area in the gathering darkness. A few scattered streetlights were coming on around the park, but there was no moon, and the stars were lost in the sky-glow of the city. "I just wonder where he could be."

"What's his name?"

"Zoltan."

"Zoltan what?"

"Ah...I think that had better wait until you meet him."

Across the grass of the park came a familiar sound—the mutter of an angry crowd approaching. Napoleon listened, and a moment later he heard the pounding footsteps of a man running on the pavement coming towards them. The mob was coming from the same direction. Napoleon looked down the concrete walk toward the parking lot. "Oh-oh," he said. "Here comes Zoltan."

He started up the walk at a trot, with a rather puzzled Ackerman close behind him. "What's going on here?" he was asking.

"You'll find out when you meet Zoltan," Napoleon promised. "Right now we've got to get him out of here."

"But..."

Napoleon was fumbling in his pocket. "Can you drive a Poboda?"

"I can drive—what's a Poboda?"

"Look for the big black car. Looks like an old Plymouth, sort of lumpy. Here are the keys. Just get in and get the motor running. We'll be along in a minute."

They came off the end of the walk as he handed Ackerman the keys and pointed him towards the car, then headed off in the direction of the growing sound.

The mob was no longer in full cry, but it was still approaching. Across a wide lawn and the street, Napoleon realized with a slight shock that some of them actually were carrying torches—tightly rolled cylinders of newspaper,

from the way they flared, but torches nonetheless. The whole thing seemed almost fantastic, as he watched the mob hunting a man they must have sincerely believed to be a vampire. It didn't seem real—more like some dream after a double-feature horror film. But it probably seemed pretty real to Zoltan, Napoleon realized, looking about him. He should be somewhere around here....

"Zoltan!" he called softly. "Come out, come out, wherever you are!"

Silence answered him. But he *had* been running this way—could they have caught him? No, he would have heard their shouts of success. Perhaps they were close to where he was hiding, and Napoleon was not. He went closer, ducked into some bushes and called again, in English.

After a moment there was an answer from some twenty feet away, and above him. He looked up. There was Zoltan, crouching on a tree limb, almost hidden by foliage.

Napoleon addressed him severely. "Come on down and let's get out of here. If they saw you up there they'd just set fire to the tree, and forget about the stake through your heart."

Zoltan frowned, then chuckled ruefully and swung down. "What do you think they would have done," he asked, "if they had found me hanging head-down by my knees from that branch?"

Napoleon didn't bother answering, instead concentrating on leading them through the underbrush towards the car. In the darkness they heard the continuing mutter of the searching crowd.

Zoltan stopped short at the edge of the parking lot, and took Napoleon's shoulder. "Watch out," he said. "There's someone in the car."

Napoleon laughed. "Don't worry. I've found a student of some of your family history, and enlisted his aid. He doesn't know who you are yet, though, and I think he'll be terribly impressed when you tell him."

"What's his name?"

"Ackerman—Forrest J no period Ackerman. He's an American, intelligent, and trustworthy as near as I can tell. Sharp, too; he recognized my name from somewhere and knew I work for U.N.C.L.E. He knows about the murders, but not about Endros' death."

"I see no reason to keep him waiting any longer," said Zoltan, striding forward. "If he knows much about vampires, he will be able to see a glance that I am innocent. If he knows nothing of vampires, he will not be afraid of me." He paused and glanced over his shoulder in the direction of the street and the fading sound of the crowd. "It is only those who know a little about vampires that are frightened at my name. *Sips of knowledge intoxicate the brain, while deeper drinking sobers it again*, as some English poet or other put it."

"You're close enough," Napoleon said, opening the car door. "Forry Ackerman of America, meet Count Zoltan Dracula of Pokol."

Ackerman's mouth dropped open. "Really?" he said. "Well, how about that!" He extended a hand. Zoltan took it, and Ackerman looked closely as they shook hands.

Zoltan followed his glance, and laughed. "Yes, my second and third fingers are quite different lengths," he said. "You'll also find my canine teeth to be normal, and my face to be reflected quite clearly in the rear-vision mirror. Nor have I any aversion to silver, crucifixes, or garlic. Are you disappointed?"

Forry seemed to be having a little trouble with his speech. At last he said, "Well, I'm not really sure whether I'm disappointed or relieved. It's just a surprise meeting a real-life Dracula."

"He's better than that," said Napoleon, "and we'll be glad to tell you about that over dinner. Do you have a car here?"

"No; I came by taxi."

"Fine. Can we drop you somewhere?"

"You can be my guests at dinner," said Forry positively. "I wouldn't miss an opportunity to get an interview with the real Count Dracula for my readers." He glanced up. "I presume you eat solid food?"

Zoltan smiled. "Yes, and I even like my steak well-done."

Chapter 8: "Begone, You Fiend of Satan!"

Illya and Hilda spent a pleasant afternoon in the woods with *Colonel* Hanevitch. Illya found the spot where the car had been left, with little trouble, and the path was still there. But distances are deceiving in the fog, and he was unable to decide where the cave had been.

At first he led them back along the path as far as he thought he and Napoleon had come—and found himself in the middle of a little hollow, with no hillside nearby. Then he began casting about in both directions, and came up with three or four likely-looking hillsides over about half a mile, but none of them seemed to contain a cave.

Illya sat down on a rock and scowled. He could recognize no landmarks; the rich green depths of the forest in clear afternoon sunlight were completely alien to the fog-shrouded mysteries of the night before. His memory supplied him only with the outline of the cave mouth, and the gray fingers of fog growing about the edges of the rock. Even the exact contour of the path had been hardly visible at their feet.

"This *is* the path," he said at last. "There's not another one we could have turned off of. Therefore the cave must be in one of these hills. It couldn't have been filled up overnight."

"Perhaps it never really existed," said Hanevitch in a tone which was meant to be comforting, and failed. "Sometimes when one has been working very hard, one's mind plays tricks."

Illya looked up at him without a word, but his expression said very plainly that he knew what he had seen, even if not precisely where he had seen it.

"Perhaps it was covered up," said Hilda, hopefully.

Illya shook his head. "There is nothing here to cover it with. No bushes, not even heavy grass."

Hanevitch patted him heavily on the shoulder. "My dear young friend," he said sympathetically, "come back to the village with us and we will await the return of *Domn* Solo from Brasov. Perhaps the two of you can determine between you what is to be done about this mysterious cave you remember."

Illya rose suddenly and brushed off the *Colonel's* hand. "We have a few hours of daylight left," he said brusquely. "I will go over the path again. If you wish to return to the village you may."

The *Colonel* sighed a deep and patient sigh, and followed Illya off down the path again. This time the Russian's eyes searched carefully every part of the path, looking for some trace of their flight to the car. The surface was hard-packed dirt, but he thought there should have been some marks in the softer earth on either side.

They were almost to the car when Illya stopped so suddenly that Hilda almost bumped into him. He knelt down on the path and looked closely at the ground. Then he turned slowly and started to crawl back along the path on hands and knees, studying the ground intently.

The *Colonel* looked down at him with a deeply concerned expression. "*Domn* Kuryakin," he said uneasily, "are you feeling well?"

"Quite well," said Illya impatiently. "Look." And he pointed to a slight depression in the dirt.

"At what?"

"At the footprints Napoleon or I left last night. The path was too narrow for us to be able to stay on it constantly in the dark—our feet often left impressions beside it. We were running *here*, if not farther back."

He rose slowly to his feet, but his eyes remained on the ground. The brush was thick here, and they passed between the bushes single file. On the other side, Illya studied the ground again. A slow satisfied smile spread across his face, and he looked back towards the brush.

"Come with me," he said to Hilda and the *Colonel*. "I believe we have overlooked something."

They had. On the far side of a clump of flowering bushes there was another path, and after a few moments' examination Illya rose to his feet and said, "Footprints. At the end of *this* path we should find our cave."

Hanevitch shook his head. "But the bushes have grown across the path. How could you and your friend have come through them last night without being aware of them?"

"I don't know yet," said Illya. "But we must have."

"We'd better hurry," said Hilda. "There's only about an hour of daylight left."

They hurried. Now Illya was confident, and it was not long before a corner of the hill which came right down to the path looked familiar. But the path wound about it for several hundred feet, and brush was thick all along it. Illya looked at it, then shook his head.

"There is a cave under there. If bushes could appear or overnight to conceal the path, they could also conceal the cave. *Colonel*, I ask your help. Will you start at the other end of the hill while I take this end? Just pull up the bushes enough to see definitely whether there is solid rock behind them. Hilda, you take the middle third."

Hanevitch opened his mouth as though to register a complaint against the whole situation, then looked at Illya's face again and decided not to. "Very well," he said, "but I leave when the sun does."

"And that's not long," said Hilda.

"All the more reason to hurry," said Illya shortly, and started to pull aside the bushes.

He was still searching when the shadow of a mountain peak to the west crept across the trees, and he felt a chill gust of wind. It was followed closely by *Colonel* Hanevitch, dusting off his hands.

"The sun is gone," he said, "and there is no sign of your cave."

"There is still daylight," said Illya, "and I want to find this cave. For all I know it may move if we leave it again."

The *Colonel* went reluctantly back to work, and the sky grew slowly darker. At length Illya came to the place where Hilda's search had started. He shook his head in frustration, and hurried to catch up with her.

The light was failing now. Illya looked around the corner of the hill in search of Hilda, and saw *Colonel* Hanevitch twenty or thirty yards away, hurrying towards him. They met, and the *Colonel* spoke first.

"Where is *Domnisoara* Eclary?"

"I thought she was with you," Illya answered, "or somewhere between us."

There was a giggle from behind them, and the *Colonel* spun around. "*Cine-i?*" he barked. "Who's there?"

Then the bushes parted, not ten feet away, and Hilda's face looked out with an impish grin. "I found your cave," she said. "I wondered how long it would take you." She pushed the bushes back and stepped out, revealing a tall narrow crevasse in the rock which Illya recognized instantly.

"Your little joke has cost us time," he said. "I have no special desire to stay here after dark, but I intend to investigate that cave as fully as possible in the time remaining." He held out his hand to the *Colonel*. "Flashlight?"

The *Colonel* unclipped it from his belt and handed it over. Illya pulled the bushes aside and stepped into the cave. And as he did so, all three of them heard the howl of a wolf far back in the forest. Illya only paused for a moment, then went on into the cave.

"Ah, *Domn* Kuryakin..."

"Yes, I heard it. But I intend to see where the gentleman we met here last night came from, and where he returned to when he left us so abruptly."

There was a rustling sound from the bushes behind them, and a moment later the *Colonel* and Hilda were standing beside him. "We'll help you look," Hilda suggested brightly.

Illya went on towards the back of the cave, carefully examining the wall on his left as he went. The cave was not deep, and he reached the end in seven paces. He spent some time examining the back wall, and then began working his way along the other side towards the entrance again. At last he stopped, facing Hilda and the *Colonel* with a look of frustration and puzzlement.

"It looks solid," he admitted grudgingly.

In answer there was another wolf-howl, closer than the last. "And that sounds solid," said the *Colonel* quickly. "*Domnul* Kuryakin, I intend to return to the village at once. I would not like to have your death on my conscience, so I must request you to accompany me."

"Please, Illya," said Hilda. "There's nothing in this cave."

"There was last night," said Illya stubbornly. "That man we saw was as solid as you are. And he didn't come through a rock wall." His eyes flicked around the cave one more time. His words were definite, but his voice had

just a trace of doubt as he said, "He *couldn't* have come through a rock wall...."

* * *

Illya spoke Rumanian without a trace of an accent, and that evening he inveigled some of the regular customers of the inn into conversation about the recent goings-on. Most of them, it seemed, were inclined to shrug off the fuss about vampires in the forest. Only one or two of the old men nodded shaggy wolf-gray heads and said, "Yes—the old *Voivode* is back again. He will kill a few fools and then go back to sleep."

"Fools?" said Illya.

"No man grows old who is not wise. And no wise man would go into the forest without a silver crucifix about his neck—especially at night. Young man, you may not see or hear of vampires in the city. They do not like the bright lights, and the noises are strange there. But here they come once in a while, and we learn to keep ourselves safe from them."

Illya looked around the room at the other men and women who sat unconcernedly about the fire, mugs of beer and glasses of wine in their hands. Only the old folks seemed to have their tales and fears, but...

"Ask anyone, young man. Oh, these young people have so much modern nonsense poured into them they are ashamed to do what they know is right —but they wear the cross, and they stay home at night. And I'll wager there's not a house in the village that hasn't a few bits of garlic along the windowsills and doorstep."

"Garlic won't stop wolves," said Illya. "Neither will a crucifix."

The old man peered at him through time-dimmed eyes. "Aren't you the young man who was chased by the wolves last night? Heard about that. You met the old *Voivode* too, didn't you? You were lucky, young man. Either he thought you were one of his own, or he had just fed.

"Now, wolves won't bother you if you've got sense enough to stay out of the woods after dark. Oh, sometimes they come into town, but they won't come through barred doors, and their master, he won't go in past silver and garlic. So we don't worry about it much. No sense in getting fussed; take care of yourself and you'll be safe enough." And he returned to his wine.

Illya was discussing this some time later that evening with the *Colonel*. Hilda had gone to bed back in her own room, and they were seated in the room to which the U.N.C.L.E. agents had been moved after the incident which had welcomed them to Pokol two nights before.

Illya shook his head. "They seem to think vampires are the same sort of natural menace as rats or mosquitoes," he said wonderingly. "You kill them if you get a chance, and the rest of the time you protect yourself against them and hope they go away."

"Not an unreasonable attitude," said *Colonel* Hanevitch. "To these people they are very real, and it would be foolhardy *not* to take precautions. But they see no reason to become excited and frightened of something which they have known about all their lives, just because it is closer than usual. It cannot harm them if they are careful. Only people who know little about the vampire are frightened by him."

"But it *is* unreasonable," said Illya. "Because if it's *not* a vampire, but someone masquerading as one, then when you least expect it he will prove invulnerable to your crosses and your garlic, and you will not have your guns and handcuffs ready to take him."

There was a heavy thump from the next room, and both heads swiveled to stare at the wall as though it might become transparent. The noise was not repeated, but after a moment Illya rose silently to his feet, his U.N.C.L.E. Special gripped in his right hand. He moved to the door, opened it, and peered cautiously out into the deserted hall.

Suddenly he heard Hilda scream in terror.

In three quick steps he was at the door to Hilda's room, Hanevitch behind him with his thumb on the hammer of his Tokarev, which was now on full-cock. Without pausing, Illya threw the door open wide and leaped into the room.

The light from the hall fell on a blood-chilling sight. Hilda was lying on the floor beside the bed, her hair disarranged and framing her pale face. She had fainted. The window behind her stood open, and the freezing night wind ruffled her nightgown. And she was not alone.

Standing over her, looking down on her with a fearful smile of triumph on his face, was the being they had met in the cave—*Voivode* Tsepesh Stobolzny. Now there could be no doubt of his identity. The thin lips, the high narrow nose, the heavy-lidded eyes which now stood wide open, staring at the door—all these were very clear to see.

He straightened up from a crouch over the girl's body as the door slammed open, and now his cloak billowed about him in the wind from the opened casement. His face was a ghastly white, with his mouth a scarlet gash against it. His eyes seemed to gleam as he looked at them and saw Illya's automatic. His lips parted, and a horrible dry rasping chuckle came from them.

The gun thundered and bucked in Illya's hand before he was conscious of the act of firing. The Count was rocked for a moment by the impact of the slug, but then he stepped forward again, over Hilda's body towards them. Illya fired again without effect, then leaped straight for the vampire.

Stobolzny struck at the U.N.C.L.E. agent, and Illya went spinning to the floor, where he lay dazed from the blow. Hanevitch fired one around from his Tokarev, then dropped it and sprang to one side.

The table had been laid for breakfast, and a cloth draped over the service. In a flash Hanevitch whipped off the covers and seized two silver knives from the table. Clenching one in each hand, he crossed the blades at right angles before him and advanced towards the vampire. "Begone, you fiend of Satan!" he cried.

Illya, dazed but still conscious, saw the Count stop and shrink back. He made a futile gesture at the *Colonel*, then raised one cloak-draped arm to cover his eyes. Hanevitch took another step forward. "Go!" he ordered. "Back to the darkness from whence you came!"

The Count fell back as the *Colonel* advanced, holding the cross of silver before him like a shield. Then the window was behind him, and he turned quickly, spread his cloak and leaped out into the fog and was gone.

Illya staggered to his feet and stumbled to the window a moment later. The fog was not so thick that they could not see the ground—and, as before, there was no indication beneath them that anyone had leaped from this third-floor window. He looked up, and saw only fog, and darkness. He pulled his head back, closed the window, latched it securely, and lit a lamp.

Colonel Hanevitch was still standing over Hilda's unconscious body, looking down at the knives in his hands. "I am a Communist," he was saying in a dazed voice. "I am a good, faithful, dedicated *atheist* Communist. I am a *sincere* atheist Communist. *Bozhe moi!*" And he dropped the knives and sat rather heavily upon the bed.

Suddenly Illya felt his knees begin to shake, just a little. He *knew* what he had just seen was impossible, and he understood how the *Colonel* felt. Just knowing something isn't enough, especially when you have just had it very plainly disproved to you.

He knelt beside Hilda and lifted her head. She was beginning to stir, and he looked quickly at her throat. Clean. They had arrived just in time. A minute later might have been too late....

Section III: "Into The Darkness Where The Undead Wait."

Chapter 9: "The Only Way Out Is Through."

Napoleon and Zoltan arrived long after midnight, and Napoleon crept into his room at the inn quietly so as not to awaken his partner. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness he noticed a dark-haired figure in his bed, and he halted half-way across the room.

"It's Hilda," said the soft, wide-awake voice of Illya from the next bed. "She made up the couch for you, in case you came back tonight after all."

Napoleon recognized her face now in the darkness. As he turned to the couch she suddenly rolled over and came awake with a stifled scream.

"Oh! Napoleon, I didn't recognize you in the dark."

He sighed deeply. "Okay, what did I miss tonight? Did Illya break a window this time?"

"Nothing so simple, I'm afraid," said his partner. "*Colonel* Hanevitch and I were in here talking, Hilda had gone to bed, and we heard her scream. When we came in, the Count was standing over her—leaning over her, actually, just about to sink his fangs into her throat. I fired point-blank at him twice, and...well, perhaps I missed. Then he knocked me down. Hanevitch drove him away"—Illya's voice seemed to catch, but he continued steadily—"with two silver knives forming a cross. He went out the open window, and disappeared into the night."

There was several seconds' silence while this sank in, and then Napoleon spoke. "Well...outside of that, how was your day?"

"Napoleon, this is past joking," said Hilda, with a tremor in her voice. She sat up in bed with the covers pulled around her and one flannel-clad arm

resting across her knees. "I don't know what almost happened to me tonight, but I'm not ashamed to admit I'm terrified." She pointed at the windows. "Look."

Solo moved quietly across the room as Illya turned on his bedside lamp. There were garlands of some kind around the frame, and as he came closer, he could smell the odor of garlic. Then he saw the buds interwoven with the whitish flowers and nodded.

"It's like the old story of the man scattering strips of paper from the train in Vermont," he said. "He told his seat-mate it would keep elephants away. 'But there aren't any elephants in Vermont,' the other guy said. 'Yes—effective, isn't it?'"

Illya snorted a little. "What happened to you in Brasov? Suddenly you're cynical again."

"I found out a few things, mostly background on our mysterious Count Tsepesh. And Zoltan got himself chased by a mob again—one of these days they're going to catch him. And we met a gentleman by the name of Ackerman. American, knows everything worth knowing about vampires, and doesn't believe in them for a minute. Very intelligent, very entertaining, and a fine host. As soon as he heard Zoltan's name, he insisted on buying us dinner, and we talked vampires all through it. Historical backgrounds of the legends, a few real blood-fixated psychotics, real vampire bats, and so on. I feel much better about the whole thing now."

Illya nodded slowly. "We found the cave today," he said, "after a remarkable amount of trouble. The path was covered with brush—and so was the mouth of the cave. And the cave was solid all the way around; back, sides, floor and ceiling. You were there. How did the Count get in and out? How did he drive away those wolves?"

"Well, I'm sure there's a logical..."

"You weren't here tonight, Napoleon. I didn't miss that creature in Hilda's room. I was ten feet away from him. My gun was not filled with blanks. He

went out a third-floor window and disappeared into the fog."

"... logical *rational* explanation."

Illya took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Then he shook his head. "I wish I could have met this Mr. Ackerman," he said. "I'd feel a lot happier if *I* could be convinced of that." He looked up at Napoleon, the faintest of smiles beginning to show on his face. "That couch will be comparatively uncomfortable, you know. Why don't you simply trade beds with Hilda tonight? Sleep in her room."

Napoleon thought about this for several seconds. "Wellllll, I...I'd better stay in here. Mr. Waverly has warned us about compromising situations while on assignment, and you should have a chaperone."

Illya nodded, a satisfied look on his face. "Very good, Napoleon—a logical, rational reason for staying here." He leaned back on his pillow, drew up the covers, and switched off the light. "Good night—and pleasant dreams."

* * *

They all slept late the next morning, and it was getting on towards noon before they met downstairs for breakfast.

Zoltan had been unable to find much definite information on the current ownership or occupancy of the castle—it had been sold to a firm of developers for possible use as a vacation resort. The skiing was good in the mountains, and even this late there was snow on the peaks above the village. But nothing had come of it. The castle was still the property of this firm, which had apparently gone into receivership some few years ago, and as to its present tenancy nothing could be determined.

"I am becoming convinced," Zoltan concluded, "that the answer to all our questions lies within the walls of Castle Stobolzny."

"Fine," said Hilda. "I suppose you'll walk up to the front gate, ring a bell, tell whoever answers, 'My name is Dracula; would you like to hire an

assistant?' and see what happens?"

"In fact, no. I was thinking more of going in by a more devious route." He leaned forward conspiratorially. "As you know, I grew up in that castle—at least for some few years. A boy does a lot of exploring, and keeps his discoveries secret. The place is honeycombed with secret passages, some of which not even my grandfather knew about. And some of them lead to the outside."

"And since we're outside already," said Napoleon brightly, "they would lead inside just as easily."

"Exactly. The three of us will make the venture this evening. If you have not lost your courage of last night, that is."

Napoleon smiled and shook his head.

Zoltan looked at Illya, and asked the same question silently with a cant of his eyebrows.

Illya moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue, and said, "Of course. I wouldn't miss it for the world."

Hilda looked from him to Zoltan, and back again. Her jaw dropped just slightly. "You're *mad*," she said. "You really are! There's nothing you could do in there but get yourselves killed!—or worse!"

"Oh, I don't know," said Illya lightly. "If we find him, we could always drive a stake through his heart."

Hilda shook her head. "And not only that—you're planning on going in there and leaving me *all alone*. Well, if you're going in there, I'm certainly going with you."

All three of them started to object, but she raised her hand. "No, I'm perfectly serious," she said. "I would be more afraid here, alone, than I would be there, with you three."

Napoleon, Zoltan and Illya looked at each other; then they looked at her a while. "I do believe she means it, boys," said Zoltan with a smile.

"Of course I do," Hilda said. "Now let's hear no more about it. When will we leave?"

"About four this afternoon. I know an entrance quite a ways down the hill from the castle, with no possible way of observing it from there. If there is an occupant, he won't know we're coming."

"Unless he's wired the entrance."

"Not likely; even my grandfather didn't know about this one. And if he has wired it, I must depend on your professional knowledge to get us past it undetected."

Illya nodded and raised his glass. "To tonight, then, and success."

They toasted all around, and settled down to finish breakfast with only slightly lessened appetites.

* * *

It seemed a short time later when they were walking quietly through a section of the woods strange to them, each armed with a handgun, a knife, and a large electric lantern. All were in peasant garb, in case they should be spotted by some legal resident of the castle.

Zoltan was looking around him doubtfully as they walked, and occasionally correcting their course. "After all," he said once, "it has been twenty-five years since I played here, and landmarks do change...."

Then he brightened. "There it is, I think. Behind that rock." And so it was. The entrance was just large enough to crawl into, and it was overgrown with weeds and brush, but it looked unoccupied. Illya checked it for wires and found no sign of any detection apparatus, so they all went in on hands

and knees, Zoltan first, followed by Illya, followed by Hilda, with Napoleon bringing up the rear.

A few feet inside the lights were switched on, and the tunnel roof rose to a comfortable height. Comfortable for Hilda and Illya, that is—Napoleon and Zoltan had to stoop slightly.

"Odd," murmured the Rumanian. "I remember the passage as being much larger." Then he smiled at his own foolishness. "Of course, I was much smaller, too."

He beckoned them and they started forward.

The passage began to rise gently, then more steeply. Soon the floor became cut into steps, and they were climbing.

After a while Zoltan spoke again. "We may be in here for some time, and it would probably be best if we conserve our batteries. As leader and guide, I shall keep mine on. Napoleon, as last man, keep yours on. Hilda, you and Illya can switch yours off for the time being."

The darkness moved in a little closer as two of the lights went out, and the little group moved on.

They seemed to be plodding along, sometimes on the level and sometimes on a slope, never moving. Rough rock walls appeared ahead of them, moved slowly by, and vanished again into the pitch blackness behind them. Napoleon had started off counting paces, but soon lost track. He felt as though they had come into the very heart of the mountain down this tunnel, and it seemed endless. Perhaps it connected with the Bucharest subway system, he thought whimsically—or came out somewhere in northern Greece. No, they'd come too far for that; they must be approaching Athens now....A scrap of an old poem came back to him about a group of people claiming to have come from northern Germany to Transylvania underground; he was beginning to believe it. This must be an extension of the same tunnel....

And then there was a break in the wall ahead, and Zoltan motioned them to a stop. "We're now under the castle," he said softly. "There are many interconnecting passages, and they twist most confusingly, so stay close to me."

"Better than that," said Hilda, pulling something out of her pocket. "It's not a ball of twine, but a piece of chalk to blaze our trail through this labyrinth ought to come in handy."

"Clever girl," said Zoltan. "I am afraid I must admit I don't remember all these passages quite as well as I thought I did. Come along now, and we will make our way on up into the basement."

Napoleon pondered that statement for the next few minutes, and followed without thinking too much about Zoltan's bobbing light ahead of him, flickering as it was shadowed and obscured by the moving black silhouettes of Hilda and Illya. His own light illuminated the floor about his own feet and Illya's, and his attention was focused on that when he almost bumped into his partner.

He looked up, startled. Illya had stopped and was looking around. They were alone.

"Which way did they go?" Illya asked.

"I thought you were following Hilda," Napoleon said doubtfully.

Illya cleared his throat embarrassedly. "Well, I was. But I let my attention wonder, and when I looked up...she wasn't there. I'm afraid they were about fifteen feet ahead of us when I looked last—they must have turned into a side passage."

"Well, they can't be very far away." Napoleon raised his voice a little. "Hilda," he called softly. "Hilda?"

"Not so loud," Illya cautioned. "Remember, there may be someone asleep upstairs."

"I wouldn't mind that," Napoleon said drily. "I'm only worried about someone being awake."

He cupped his hands and called again, "*Hilda! Zoltan!*" in a penetrating stage whisper. There was no answer.

He shrugged. "What do we do now? Do you remember the last three turns we took?"

"We could wait here and hope to be found; it's more sensible than wandering about and getting ourselves even more lost."

Napoleon considered this. "Somehow," he admitted, "I don't feel quite as sensible as I did a few hours ago. I think we should cast about—carefully, of course—and look for Zoltan's chalk marks. When we find them, we can follow right along to wherever they are, and we won't be lost any more."

"Unless they are lost too."

Napoleon looked at him. "Optimist. Maybe your vampire got them."

Illya looked at him. "Under the circumstances," he said, "that's not especially funny."

"Sorry. Come on—let's get going. They couldn't have left us too far back. Let's start looking for likely places."

They started backtracking slowly, both lights scanning the walls for chalk marks. There were none. But eventually a passage opened off to their right—a wide stone-walled passage, which looked tall enough to stand up in.

They paused, and shot their lights around it. "Looks reasonable," said Napoleon. "They couldn't have left us much before here, and I don't see anything else that looks at all likely."

Illya nodded. "Let's give it a try. After all, we can't be any more lost than we are already."

"Oh, yes we can," said Napoleon cheerfully.

Illya considered the implications of the remark and scowled. "I've told you, Napoleon, that's not funny." He paused. "Perhaps it is. Try it on me again when we are out of here and my sense of humor has recovered somewhat."

They started off down the hall, rock ceiling arching overhead, rock floor underfoot, spots of light sweeping back and forth ahead of them, and darkness pressing close behind.

Chapter 10: "The Coffin Is Empty."

Their footsteps echoed weirdly around them as they moved through the silent tunnels. At first Napoleon called Hilda's name, or Zoltan's, but each time his voice awoke whispering echoes that went muttering off into the distance. Finally he just watched for reasonable places to turn, and turned there, checking each time for chalk marks.

At last there was one. It was a neat blue chalk "X" just below eye-level, and just above a short arrow pointing to the left. Napoleon heaved a sigh of relief. "There we are," he said to his partner. "They must have come this way. Now we can hurry along and catch them."

"I hope so," said Illya. "This place is beginning to get on my nerves."

There were no marks at the next three intersections, but the fourth had another "X" and an arrow pointing to the right. They took the turn unhesitatingly. There were no intersections and no marks for several minutes, and the tunnel rose higher. Then it turned left and right as it climbed until Napoleon began to get dizzy.

Finally he paused. "I thought of bringing a compass when we left the inn," he said. "But then I said to myself, 'No, we'll have a trustworthy native guide.' And I didn't bring it."

"Next time you'll know better," said Illya.

"Probably not," said Napoleon. "I'm just too trusting, I guess."

They continued climbing. At last a passage opened to their left, and a few feet farther another opened to their right. Neither one had any mark on it. The passage climbed higher. After a while another pair of passages opened, and the right-hand one had an arrow chalked on its wall pointing into their passage. It was in white chalk.

Illya looked at it, and then said softly, "Napoleon..."

"What?"

"We've been following blue chalk marks."

"So?"

"I think...I'm not positive, but I *think* Hilda gave Zoltan a stick of *white* chalk."

"Do you think we found them now?"

"I don't know. Apparently these tunnels have been used by other people at other times, and some of them also used chalk. I think it was dreadfully inconsiderate of them not to have washed the walls down after they finished with them."

"So we may have been following some long-dead resident who liked to sneak down to the village without his wife finding out," said Napoleon with a shrug. "Since the tunnel's heading up, we're more likely to come out in the castle than out on a hillside; and as I recall, the original purpose of this expedition was to get inside the castle."

Illya nodded reluctantly, and lifted his light. "Further up and further in, then," he said resignedly.

"Further up and further in," Napoleon agreed.

* * *

There were no more chalk marks on the walls for a goodly distance. Then another white arrow turned them into a side path which ran along level for a ways and then turned down again.

Napoleon stood at the top of the incline and looked down. Illya stopped behind him. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing, really," said his partner. "Just that I've put so much energy into climbing this far, I hate to waste it by climbing down again."

"All right," said Illya. "You wait here, and if I ever get out, I'll send a rescue party for you."

"Never mind, never mind. It was just a thought."

They started down the steeply slanting tunnel, feet skidding slightly on the uneven floor. The tunnel leveled off then, and both of them stopped together, shining their lights ahead.

The floor of the tunnel rose sharply, but the ceiling didn't rise away from it. There was a mound of rubble which completely filled the tunnel—rubble impossible to date, other than by the fact that there was no dust in the air. It could have been there six hours, or two hundred years.

"I hope he made it back from the village before that happened," said Napoleon.

"Well," said Illya, "at least we know the white chalk isn't Zoltan's."

"Unless there's another passage we've overlooked."

"Wishful thinking. Come on, back up to the main tunnel."

* * *

The main tunnel continued to rise, wider now and with a paved floor. In the yellow light from their electric lanterns they could see smoke stains on the

ceiling, and even occasional brackets that looked as if they had once held torches.

"Ah," said Napoleon. "Signs of civilization."

"We may be getting close to the inhabited parts of the castle," Illya murmured. "Let's cut back to one light."

He cut his off, and the darkness moved a little closer.

Eventually the passage grew inexplicably narrower, and then they turned a tight corner and the walls fell away on either side and disappeared. Suddenly they were in a room—a room of unguessable extent. Napoleon's flash found heavy carved beams ten or fifteen feet overhead, and a wall perhaps thirty feet away to their left. The rest was darkness.

He cast the light behind them for a moment, and saw they had come out of a narrow doorway between two great pairs of wooden trestles on which rested barrels of something—probably wine. Dust was heavy on the barrels, and so deep on the floor that it muffled their footsteps. No one had come that way for more years than he would care to contemplate.

Illya flicked his light on, and send it off into the darkness of the wine cellar. "Well," he whispered, "we're inside. Now what?"

"I guess we just keep looking," said Napoleon.

"What for?"

"I'll let you know when I see it."

They stayed close to the wall, and worked their way along to another door, oak-beamed and barred. It opened into another passage, which led to a flight of stone steps—leading down.

At the bottom of the stairs they found themselves in another room. The room was small, but as their lights traversed the walls, Napoleon felt his

neck prickle. They were lined with plaques, each bearing a name and two dates. Some of them had small portraits engraved upon them.

Illya spoke first. "Is this what we were looking for?"

Napoleon shook his head slowly. "I don't think so. There's nothing here of vital interest to us. There probably isn't even another way out." He scanned his light around the walls, slowly. The spot of light slid over the tarnished squares of metal to the far wall, and traversed it slowly. Then it stopped on something large and black. Instantly Illya's light swung to join it.

Twenty yards away across the floor a black drapery hung from the low ceiling. It spread as it fell, and formed a canopy around a stone dais. And on the dais rested a black coffin. Though dust was thick through the rest of the room, not a speck marred the dull surface of that sinister box—it looked as though it were polished daily.

On the side of the coffin a large medallion bore the Stobolzny arms, which Napoleon recognized from his researches. The spotlights centered on it and stopped. Even from this distance they could see that the lid of the coffin was slightly ajar.

"That one looks opened," said Napoleon carefully.

"That's right," said Illya. "It looks open."

Each glanced at the other, and neither said anything else for a long moment.

Finally Napoleon said, "Well! Let's...let's go take a look at it."

Illya considered this. "You take a look at it," he said. "I'll guard the door."

Napoleon managed a slight smile, and started hesitantly towards the coffin. It seemed to be quite a distance from Illya and the other light, but he walked boldly the twenty-five paces across the musty, silent, dust-shrouded tomb to the low stone dais where it lay.

At last he stood beside it.

"Illya..."

"Yes?" Illya's voice seemed distant, and more muffled than sixty feet should have accounted for.

"It *is* open." He ran his light slowly over the lid, and stopped it on the plaque. "It says *Voivode Tsepesh Drakula-Stobolzny -- 1671*...Uh...there's no date of death here."

"Remember, Napoleon, his body was never found."

"I remember." He paused. *"I wonder who used this coffin?"*

"Why don't you look and see?" Illya suggested.

Napoleon glanced over his shoulder. His partner was still close to the door. He turned back towards the coffin, and the faintest of smiles might have danced momentarily across his lips. "All right," he said. "I will."

The lid was loose, and he shifted his flashlight to a more convenient grip. He slipped his fingertips under the edge of the lid and lifted. There was a blood-chilling groan from the concealed hinges and the ponderous slab of wood swung back and thumped down on a rest with a deep *BOOM* which echoed through the chamber for many seconds.

Napoleon had jumped back automatically as the lid had come up in his grip, as easily as if it had been counterbalanced. But as nothing burst out of the dark recesses of the coffin at him, he quickly recovered his balance. He lifted the light to shine over the edge and peered hesitantly in.

"Well?" said Illya impatiently.

"The coffin is empty," said Napoleon slowly, looking into the box. The red satin lining was as bright as if new, but there were smudges of something at the foot end—they looked like dried mud—and stains of something brown

and slightly crusted near the head end. While he was looking, Napoleon kept speaking.

"Not exactly empty," he said slowly. "There's a layer of dirt in the bottom of the casket, and what looks like the impression of a body in it...."

He glanced over his shoulder to see the effect this was having on Illya, and continued: "Wait a minute...here's a piece of paper, with something written on it." He pretended to pick something out of the empty coffin. "It says...*Out to Lunch??*"

Illya grimaced in exasperation. "Napoleon," he said very patiently, "is there anything there or isn't there?"

Napoleon smiled briefly. "No, not really. I just thought we were being awfully serious about this. After all, here we are, two grown men skulking about in somebody's cellar, as nervous as little boys playing in a haunted house. I decided it was time to break the mood."

Illya was silent for a moment, as Napoleon came back across the vault towards him. Then he glanced at the coffin. "Aren't you going to close the lid again? We wouldn't want anyone to know we'd been here."

Napoleon took an automatic step back towards the coffin, then turned to Illya. "I just finished saying there's nothing..."

"Somebody has been dusting it," said Illya mildly, and Napoleon stopped in mid-sentence. His face changed as he thought about that, then without another word he walked quietly back across the chamber, reached over the coffin, pulled the lid towards him, and let it down gently. Then he came back to the door.

"Now are you happy?"

"Deliriously. Now can we return to looking for a way out of here?"

Napoleon was reluctant. "Our original purpose in this little invasion of privacy was to find out if someone was using this castle for something, or someone was staying here, or something."

"Well, we've found out."

"What?"

"Something," said Illya. "Now let's go. It's well after midnight, and..."

A sharp and strangely familiar whistling note sounded within the chamber, and echoed from the heavy stone walls. It was several seconds before they recognized it, and Napoleon reached for his communicator. It seemed so out of place in this dark medieval chamber that he stared at it for a few seconds as if he'd never seen it before. Then he pulled up the antenna and said, "Solo here."

"Good morning, Mr. Solo," said the familiar voice of Alexander Waverly. "I hoped you would still be up at this hour. I've been looking for an interim report from you. What have you accomplished so far?"

"Well, it's...kind of hard to say, sir. We don't exactly have any concrete results, but we feel we're making progress."

"Hmph. Have you found any evidence of what killed Endros?"

Napoleon and Illya looked at each other. Illya nodded intently, but Napoleon thought about it for a minute. "Ah...not exactly, sir. The...ah...the situation here is—sort of unusual."

"Where are you at the moment? Your signal is weak, and your voice sounds as if you were in a cave."

"Well, we are...sort of in a cellar, you might say."

"Prisoners?"

"Uh, no—more like trespassers, actually."

"I hope you have a good reason. Remember, you're supposed to be investigating Endros' death. Have you any clue as to his slayer?"

"Not yet, sir, but we're working on it."

"I have no doubt of that." Was there the slightest touch of sarcasm in their superior's voice? "It's a good thing I have a great deal of faith in you and Mr. Kuryakin—it is often strained but usually justified. I expect you to maintain your record. Good night."

"Good night, sir," said Napoleon.

Chapter 11: "There Must Be A Logical, Rational Explanation."

Somehow the voice of their superior officer had come at just the right time, and said just the right things. As Napoleon tucked the transceiver away, he glanced around the little vault. Now it seemed almost cozy; a quiet, peaceful cave where ancient remains could molder away the centuries after lifetimes of toil and sorrow.

He looked at Illya, and shrugged. "You're right. We may as well go home. This ridiculous situation must have affected our minds. For a while there I'd forgotten there must be a logical, rational explanation for all the things that have been happening."

"Yes," said Illya. "Let's just hold that thought while we get out of here."

Napoleon nodded.

Soon they were back in the wine cellar. The darkness beyond the range of the lights began to prey on Napoleon's nerves again as they crossed the dust-carpeted floor, but the relatively comforting stone walls of the tunnel eased his tight back muscles a little.

Suddenly he stopped. "Illya," he said. "I just realized we have been going about this all wrong."

The Russian raised an eyebrow at him.

"Yes," said Napoleon. "We know this rabbit warren opens somewhere into the outside world. Therefore there should be a current of air blowing towards this opening. All we have to do is follow it, and it'll lead us back to safety."

"Brilliant, Napoleon. Now tell me, which way is the air current blowing now?"

Napoleon looked around. The air was perfectly still, as nearly as he could tell. He frowned, then reached into his pocket and smiled. He pulled out his cigarette lighter and struck it. The flame rose bright yellow, and stood perfectly steady. He looked at it with a betrayed expression.

"Well, in the book it said..."

"Don't worry, Napoleon. Maybe there will be an air current farther along."

"But it said...Oh, never mind." He closed the lighter and dropped it back in his coat pocket, and then walked down the passage after Illya, thinking hard.

* * *

A long time later he stopped and looked around quickly. Something very faint and chill had brushed ever so softly over the back of his neck, and he didn't think it was nerves. "Illya..." he said.

The Russian stopped, and looked around.

"Watch." Napoleon pulled out his lighter and struck it again. The flame sprang out, and this time it flickered. It danced agilely and the tip of it pointed in the direction ahead of them.

He smiled happily. "See?" he said. "Air currents. What did I tell you?"

"That's nice," said Illya, "but we were already going that way. Why not save it for times when we come to an intersection and can't decide? I'm sure it would be more dependable than flipping a coin."

Napoleon didn't say anything as he put his lighter away. Apparently hearing from Waverly didn't affect Illya quite as salubriously as himself; his partner still seemed edgy. He shrugged it off; he hadn't been perfectly cool all evening himself.

They continued down the corridor at a steady pace. The stone floor angled down gently, and only occasional small tunnels branched off to the sides. The air continued to caress the backs of Napoleon's ears. At last the tunnel narrowed and branched, and the cigarette lighter was called into service once more.

Five more times in the next half-hour the lighter sparked and caught the gentle drift of air directing them to the exit. And then at last they could smell wet vegetation, and the air grew colder around them.

The walls of the tunnel drew in closer and became rough stone; the roof became lower until they had to stoop.

Then leaves whispered under their feet, they ducked around one last projection of rock, and there was a wind again, and all the night of the forest was around them. Napoleon stood up very straight and stretched his arms.

"Oh! That feels good!"

"Don't be too relieved, Napoleon," said Illya. "We're not out of the woods yet."

Napoleon froze, and looked quizzically at Illya.

"This isn't the entrance we went in by. We still have to make our way through the forest and out the other side to the village." Illya looked around

and shook his head. "For all I know, we may have come out on the other side of the mountain from Pokol."

Napoleon glanced at the sky and nodded. "And this overcast very effectively prevents celestial navigation." He shrugged. "Let's find a tree and see which side of it is mossy."

"That may not be a bad idea. If it's the side away from the mountain, we'll know the village is ahead of us. If it's the side towards the mountain..."

"We look for road and try to hitch a ride. Let's worry about that after we check for moss. And Illya—in the future, remind me to bring a compass."

The first tree they examined had no moss on it; the second had moss all around. The third had moss on one side, the fourth on the other. Illya finally looked at Napoleon with an expression of infinite patience. "What else did you learn in the Boy Scouts?"

"I can start a fire by rubbing two matches together, treat snakebite, and hot-wire a car. I belonged to a very progressive troop."

"Forget I asked. If we walk downhill long enough, we'll probably come to a road of some kind, and following that will lead us to some form of civilization."

They set off downhill. The ground was soft and damp, as though it had rained earlier that evening, and it stuck to their feet. The air was icy cold—not quite freezing, but nearly. Higher on the mountain the ground would have been crusted with rime. The fog moved in on them as they descended, and soon white fingers were writhing around the dark tree-trunks in the beam of the flash. Illya's was weakening, after a full night of use, and they were about to switch over to Napoleon's when they struck a path at last.

It ran along the hillside, which had leveled off a short time before. Illya looked both ways on it, and frowned. "We're still lost," he said. "One way will lead downhill, the other will lead up."

"We'll split up," said Napoleon. "You go right and I'll go left, and we'll keep in touch with the transceivers. When the path starts to go down, give a call to the other end and we'll be off on the road to Pokol."

Illya nodded. "Why didn't we think of giving one of the transceivers to Hilda or Zoltan?" he asked suddenly. "Think of all the trouble that could've saved us."

"Why don't you ever get these great ideas when they'll do us some good?"

Illya sighed. "But that would take all the challenge out of life," he said.

* * *

Napoleon's chosen path wound among widely spaced trees which rose up out of sight into the mist. The woods seemed terribly silent, as if the trees were holding their breath, waiting for something to happen. His feet made no sound as they sank into the damp dirt of the forest floor. The yellow cone of light from his lantern stood out through the mist and swept soundlessly over the trees and bushes and the bare earth of the path he was following.

Then the air began to move about him, and the trees began to whisper and mutter to themselves, as a strange directionless wind moved down among them. It stirred Napoleon's hair and plucked lightly at his clothing. And then he saw something standing in the path ahead of him. He stopped, and focused his light on it.

It was tall and black, surrounded by curling tendrils of fog which enshrouded it with ghostly white. Then, as Napoleon stared, part of it moved down slowly, revealing a death-white face with flaming eyes. The figure lowered its arms and took a deliberate pace towards him. Napoleon took half a pace backward and stopped. The face which caught the light from his lantern and the eyes which threw the light back were those he had seen in the cave, those he had seen in a miniature painting of a man dead two hundred and fifty years. It was the Count Tsepesh Stobolzny.

Napoleon took another step back as the Count came forward, the shadow cast by the lantern rising behind him great and black as his cloak billowed about him. He stopped ten feet away, and a slow horrible smile contorted his face. Solo's hands dived for his shoulder holster and flipped out his U.N.C.L.E. Special. He held the gun low enough that the other man could see it in the light and said, "Okay—stop right there or I'll shoot."

A moment later he realized he had spoken in English, and repeated in Rumanian, "*Opreste ce va spun ori trag!*"

The Count's lips parted and a ghastly dry creaking laugh welled from him as he took another step toward Napoleon and reached out a gloved hand. He was so close his teeth were clearly visible—the two canines unnaturally elongated and pointed, almost like fangs.

Napoleon's fingers spasmed on the trigger of his automatic and it roared in the silence of the forest—once, twice and again, slamming solidly against his hand.

The Count took a small step back, then looked down at the gun. His bloodless lips opened and a gust of demoniacal laughter rang among the trees. He raised his arms and spread them wide, and his cloak fell from them like great black wings for an instant before he clapped them down and leaped.

Napoleon fell to his knees and fired again as the Count soared over his head. A moment later he heard a last burst of laughter echoing down through the fog from somewhere high above him, but the Count had disappeared into the darkness.

He was still on his knees on the ground when his transceiver whistled.

"Napoleon, are you all right?" It was Illya's voice. "Was that you shooting?"

He fumbled out the little silver rod and extended the microphone clip. "Illya? Yes, I'm okay—I think. It was Count Tsepesh again. I'll tell you about it when I see you."

"Okay. I found where the path starts downhill. Shall I start back up to meet you?"

"No. Just keep a sharp eye on everything around you—and above you. And, ah, if you see something in gray and brown running down the path toward you, don't shoot, it's me."

"I'll be waiting."

"Oh, and Illya..."

"Yes?"

"If you do have a silver crucifix, I suggest you hold onto it tight."

* * *

Fifteen minutes later they were standing side by side where the path curved over the edge of the hill and started down again. The long walk through the woods and the passage of time had given Napoleon a little more perspective on what had happened, but he was still upset. He had described the entire incident to Illya with as little emotional coloring as possible, and Illya had made no comment of any kind.

Now the Russian agent was leaning against a tree, having just removed the clip from his automatic. Napoleon couldn't quite tell what he was doing with it, though, and asked.

Without looking up, Illya said, "Napoleon, you understand that I am *not* superstitious, and I am not falling prey to the blind unthinking terror which seems to grip less sophisticated people than we."

"Yes...."

"And I want you to be sure that I fully agree with you that there is a rational, logical explanation for everything that has been going on."

"Yes...."

"So for the time being I have rationally and logically decided to carve a cross on each of my bullets."

* * *

Some minutes later they started off downhill again. The fog grew gradually lighter as they descended, and after some time only an occasional wisp came past them like a vagrant spirit. The forest was silent, and both were beginning to breathe more easily. Eventually the path would come to a road, and along the road would lie a village. And there would be hot food and warm beds, and safety. The long night was almost over.

And then their necks pricked and their hands started for their shoulder holsters almost together as the forest darkness was filled with a sound—a sound which they knew and remembered.

It was the howl of a hunting wolf.

Chapter 12: "You're Looking Inscrutable Again."

Neither one of them said anything as they slowly turned to look at each other. The howl was echoed to both sides, and then a fourth gave cry ahead of them. They were surrounded.

Napoleon extinguished his lantern at once, and Illya slipped two fingers over his to cut down on the light it gave. Now they both had their automatics in hand, ready to fire. The U.N.C.L.E. Special had, among other qualities, the ability to fire double-action, without working the slide by hand. This had saved Napoleon's life on more than one occasion, and might again. It is generally bad practice to run through a dark forest with a cocked gun in your hand.

When they heard the soft sound of feet padding along the trail behind them, Illya said quietly, "I believe it's time for a tactical retreat."

Napoleon was darting quick glances into the darkness around them. "You mean you think we should run for it," he said.

"Yes," said Illya, and another howl echoed from the night.

They began to run.

The light from the one flash picked up the path before them, and the black shades of trees and bushes fled past on either side. The wolves gave no further tongue after the four howls that had warned them, but there were sounds back in the brush of heavy bodies crashing through dead undergrowth to either side of the trail.

Once Illya's light caught two green sparks from something too far to be illuminated, and both guns barked flame as the eyes disappeared. They ran forward, and found nothing but the pad marks where a great wolf had crossed the trail. They looked around, even directing the light among the trees, but saw nothing more.

Neither of them was about to go off the path to look for more targets—they had too much the feeling of being targets themselves.

The path had leveled off, and the forest was more open, but low dense clouds still covered the sky. Napoleon's lungs began to ache with the cold, and his breath formed puffs of vapor which blew about his ears and hung in the air behind him as he ran.

And even as they ran, they heard sounds behind them that told of deadly pursuit. A deep and vicious growl which seemed to be almost at their heels added to the speed of their flight, and heavy panting and once in a while a barely stifled whine stayed close behind them.

Then miraculously the trees opened out, and the road appeared before them. There would be open ground the wolves would have to cross to get to them, and even at running speed they could pick them off as they came.

There was scarcely a moment of hesitation as they hit the road. Downhill was to the left, and downhill they continued. The going was easier now, and the sounds faded away behind them.

Eventually they slowed down, panting a little from the exertion, but listening sharply between breaths. Only the occasional crack of a tree branch in the deepening cold broke the quiet.

At last Napoleon stopped and leaned against a tree. "I think we've lost them," he said.

"I wouldn't count on it," said Illya, sitting down on a rock. "Maybe they're just quieting down before sneaking in for the kill."

Napoleon shook his head. "The cold," he said sagely. "Wolves don't hunt when the temperature gets below freezing."

Illya looked at him in amazement. "You're thinking of rattlesnakes. Wolves just get more active when it's cold. I remember when I was a little boy in Siberia, being chased by a pack of wolves all the way from Yakutsk to Kirensk in the middle of winter—and the temperature was about forty degrees below zero."

"Oh, come *on*," said Napoleon. "It's seven hundred and fifty miles from Yakutsk to Kirensk."

Illya shrugged. "Well, we were on a train...."

"And the wolves chased you at sixty miles an hour for seven hundred and fifty miles?"

"Twenty-five miles an hour—this was the Trans-Siberian Railway. And I don't know if they were the same wolves all the way; maybe they ran in shifts and slept in the baggage car."

Napoleon gave up and started laughing. "Never mind," he said. "Besides, the last time you mentioned it, you were a little boy in the Ukraine."

"We moved around a lot."

Napoleon stood up again. "Well, this is only Rumania, but it still gets cold enough for me. Let's head on down the road, and see what we can find in the way of civilization." He squinted up at the sky and shook his head. "Besides, I wouldn't be surprised if it started to snow before morning. Look at those clouds."

Illya got to his feet slowly. "As long as it doesn't just get colder." He glanced at his watch. "It's still about three hours until dawn."

They started off down the road again. After some time Napoleon said, "I wonder just how many roads there are in this area. This one looks familiar. Weren't we chased along here by wolves just a few nights ago?"

"I shouldn't be at all surprised."

The cold seemed to lessen as Napoleon thought about that and realized how near they were to the village. Just a few more miles down the road were warm beds, hot food, and civilization. They'd be there in just a few more...

There was something in the road ahead of them, too far way to be seen clearly. Illya looked hard, and said, "I think it's the car!"

Napoleon smiled with satisfaction. "The end of a perfect evening," he said.

And a chorus of howls went off right behind them.

Napoleon and Illya broke into a dead run. But the pack had been right behind them when they had given tongue, and as Solo threw a quick glance over his shoulder he could see the running gray shapes fifty feet behind them. He didn't look around again—all his attention was devoted to running.

Then the car loomed up in front of him and he sprawled across the hood before he could stop. His back tensed, expecting a furry weight to hurdle itself upon him. After a moment, it hadn't, and he looked up.

The wolves had stopped in a half-circle twenty feet away from them, and stood with lowered heads.

Slowly and cautiously, making no sudden moves, Napoleon reached for his pocket, where the keys to the car waited. His hand slid in and found the chill metal. He spoke quietly, keeping his eye firmly fixed on the wolves.

"Get ready, Illya. I'm going to try to get the door open. Once we get inside we'll be safe."

"Right. I've got my gun ready, but I won't use it unless they start towards us."

"Check." The key was in Napoleon's hands now, and he began to edge along the side of the car. When he started to move, a couple of the wolves growled warningly. He stopped, one foot slightly lifted, and waited for a count of twenty before lowering it again. Then he moved much more slowly.

When he felt the door behind him, he reached around and began searching for the handle. A couple of the wolves took a slow stiff-legged step forward, and out of the corner of his eye he saw Illya's automatic swing slightly towards them.

"If I have to shoot," said his partner tensely, "get that door open as fast as you can and I'll try to hold them off and jump for it."

"Check."

The handle was there—now where was the lock? There. And which way did the key go in? Did he have the right key? It didn't seem to fit....There! It slipped in. He turned it carefully to the right, hoping the lock hadn't frozen. The tumblers caught with a sharp click as the key turned.

The noise triggered two wolves. They sprang forward so fast he could barely see them move. Illya's automatic blasted twice, and a shaggy body slammed against Napoleon's chest and drove his instinctively raised arm

hard against his face. His other arm jerked desperately at the door handle and the door came unlatched and banged his leg as he tried to open it.

The wolf that had hit him fell away from him again, its jaws locked in his overcoat and blood oozing from its chest. The other wolf had fallen just short of Illya, and lay in a crumpled heap with an exploded skull from the head shot, almost at his feet.

Napoleon tore his coat from the death-grip of the fangs that had so nearly met in his throat. Then, as he swung the door open and leaped inside, he saw to his amazement that the rest of the wolf pack was disappearing—fading back into the forest.

Illya stood, amazement and disbelief scrawled broadly across his face, pistol hanging loosely in his hand, watching them go. Then he collected himself hurriedly.

"Something's wrong," he said. "There's no reason, rational *or* irrational, why they should just leave like that."

"Let's discuss it in the car," said Napoleon. "I feel an irrational urge to emulate them, and right now."

Illya holstered his gun slowly, then bent over and looked at the wolf he had saved Napoleon from. He suddenly knelt and looked even closer. Without looking up, he said, "Turn on the car light for a moment, will you?"

Napoleon reached over and pulled the knob, and the headlights came to life. Enough light was thrown back by the ground and the bushes nearby that Illya could see quite well. Napoleon looked over his shoulder from the left-hand seat of the car.

The Russian agent had lifted the wolf's head and was examining it, running his fingers along it as though patting a dog. Something seemed to glitter amid the fur. Napoleon stared at him.

"What in the world are you doing?" he asked. "Do you want to wait for them to come back?"

"This is worth another minute," said Illya, a strange quality in his voice. "Give me a hand here—I want to get this wolf into the trunk of the car."

"Are you out of your mind?"

"Quite the contrary," said the Russian. "I think I am in it for the first time in longer than I care to consider."

Napoleon looked at him suspiciously. Illya was wearing a secret little smile, and his voice hinted at unsuspected things of great interest. Napoleon got out, opened the trunk, and helped load about a hundred pounds of dead weight into it. Then he got back behind the wheel, let Illya in the other door, and started the motor. There had been no further sign of the other wolves.

He wondered about this, and commented on it to Illya, who just nodded, and kept smiling.

Napoleon scowled at him. "You're looking inscrutable again," he said. "Will you tell me your little surprise if I ignore you long enough?"

"It won't be necessary," said Illya. "I don't really know anything yet. But when we get back to the village I expect to be very busy in Gheorghe's kitchen for some time."

"Oh, great," said Napoleon. "I've always wanted to try barbecued wolf meat."

Illya shook his head. "Not barbecued wolf, Napoleon. I have the feeling it will be a roasted bird this time—almost certainly a cooked goose."

Section IV: "The Vampire Has Been Dead Many Times...."

Chapter 13: "I Smell A Rat—A Rat with Feathers."

The first white flakes of snow began to filter down through the clouds shortly before they arrived in the village at three-thirty in the morning. They left the car in its usual berth behind the City Hall, but Illya insisted the wolf be brought back to the inn with them. So he and Napoleon slung it between them and managed to manhandle the unwieldy corpse the couple hundred yards along the dirt street, on which the mud was already lightly frozen.

Hammering on the door of the darkened inn eventually aroused a dim light in the back, and Gheorghe appeared—round, night-capped, and blinking at them over a candle flame. He scarcely shrank back from the body of the wolf, and said, "You have had luck in the hunt, I see. Will you wish him dressed?"

"No," said Illya. "I will take care of him myself, personally, in the morning. Are Hilda and Zoltan back yet?"

"*Da, domnule*. They arrived on foot shortly after midnight. We have been most worried about you. In fact, I would expect the *Vlad* Zoltan to be waiting up for you."

He was, almost. There was a low light burning beside the bed where Hilda lay sleeping peacefully, and Zoltan sat in a chair across the room, facing the window, with a hunting rifle across his knees and his head on his chest. But he jerked upright as Napoleon and Illya entered the room.

He sprang to his feet and set down the gun, then embraced them with expressions of great relief. "My dear friends! What happened to you? And did you bring the car back? We could not find it. We were so afraid you had been lost forever in the tunnels under the castle, and all for my own foolishness in not directing you correctly."

Then his eye fell on the wolf and his jaw dropped. He looked at it, and then at them. "You are not hurt?"

"No," said Illya. "One finally got close enough for a clear shot. The fact that I had cut a cross on my bullet may or may not have helped."

"Oh!" said Zoltan, remembering something. "Most important! When we were lost in the tunnels, we found our way out by a passage I had not known, by following some other chalk marks."

"Blue or white?" asked Napoleon.

"Yellow," said Zoltan, "and recently made. But they came to what appeared to be a blank wall, until I saw a lever mounted at the side of the passage. It revolved a false rock, and we found ourselves at the back of the cave."

Napoleon's eyebrows shot up in sudden speculation. Zoltan hurried on: "Hilda recognized the cave as the one which Illya had said you saw my ancestor in. And she was sure you would be most interested to know this. It suddenly appears possible that we have all been the victims of a monstrous hoax."

"Yes," said Illya, prodding the dead wolf with his toe. "I will know more in the morning. But remember, at least one person was the victim of a very real murder, whatever the method and motivation.

"As for now, I think we can all go to bed. Be sure the windows are locked and bolted, but I no longer think the crucifixes and wolfsbane will be either necessary or effective. And now we return to our room. Tomorrow will be a busy, busy day, and the hour is very late."

Napoleon followed his cue, and dragging the wolf behind them by its hind legs they went out and pulled the door closed behind them.

* * *

When Napoleon woke up that afternoon, Illya was gone. So was the body of the wolf, which had spent the night on the couch. He looked around the room, stretched, yawned, then got up and dressed.

Downstairs he found Hilda sitting in the dining room with an upset Gheorghe and several servants. She jumped up when she saw Napoleon and ran over to him.

"Oh, Napoleon, I thought you were going to sleep all day! Zoltan's in the kitchen with Illya, and they said no one else was to come in except you when you got up if you ever did."

Gheorghe was right behind her. "*Domn* Solo, they have taken over my kitchen, and I have other guests to feed. They took that accursed wolf in with them, and all I have heard for an hour has been soft voices. I asked them through the door what it is they are doing in my kitchen, and the *Vlad Drakula* says not to worry, it is very important, and they will clean it up when they are through." He looked up at Napoleon anxiously. "When you go in, ask them please to be careful with my kitchen."

Napoleon looked at the kitchen door with a growing interest. He patted Gheorghe on the shoulder and said, "I certainly will. In fact, if I can, I'll be back out in a few minutes to set your mind at ease."

He tapped at the door and called Illya's name, but it was Zoltan who slipped back the latch and let him in.

Illya was standing over the large table near the window, rows of butcher knives, paring knives, tongs and other implements beside him and an incredible mess in front of him. He wore a chef's apron to protect his clothes, and his sleeves were rolled up above his biceps. His arms were bloody up to the elbows. He looked up as Napoleon hesitantly approached the table.

"Welcome to my operating room," he said. "I've been performing a little post-mortem on our victim of last night."

Napoleon looked at the gory mess on the table and felt just a little ill. Illya noticed and smiled. "Sorry about the mess, Napoleon. But remember, you look even worse than that inside."

"It should stay inside where it belongs. All right, Doctor Crippen, what knowledge have you added to the field of medical science today?"

"Medical science has not benefited from this investigation, but criminology may have been advanced to some extent." He waved his hand over a number of what were to Napoleon undistinguishable lumps of meat, and picked one up.

"Notice the leg muscles," he said seriously. He prodded the meat with a short skewer, and separated some of the fibers. "See that?"

Napoleon saw only raw meat with a few streaks and lumps of yellow in it, and said so.

"Exactly. The yellow is fat. Fat? In a wild wolf? And especially in the leg muscles?" Illya shook his head, put down the leg, and picked up something else. "The stomach," he said. "Most interesting." With bare fingers he pulled apart an incision and pointed to a horrid-looking mass. "Remains of the last meal."

Napoleon felt even more ill, and made an inarticulate comment to that effect. "Yeuchh," he said.

"Look," Illya insisted. "Cereal grains. A *wolf* with cereal grains in its stomach?"

Napoleon turned away and stared determinedly out the window at a bare tree. "It's been a hard winter."

"Don't faint yet, Napoleon," said Illya. "You haven't seen my prize exhibit."

He took a deep breath and looked around again. The Russian was holding a thing that Napoleon finally recognized, though it was covered with blood

and somewhat cut up. It was white and convoluted, and filled Illya's hand as he held it out.

"It's the brain," said Napoleon.

"That's right, Napoleon, it's the brain," said Illya, too pleased to contain his enthusiasm. "But *this* is not a nerve." And his free hand held up something about a foot long, limp and shiny. It was a copper wire.

Napoleon looked at it closely, forgetting his queasiness in a suddenly awakened fascination. The wire ran to the surface of the brain and ended there in a small patch of off-white plastic which he hadn't noticed before. Slowly he looked up at Illya, his mouth open slightly.

Illya nodded. "The plastic is apparently some kind of solid-state radio receiver." He lifted it from the brain as he spoke, revealing two short wires descending from it. "These two leads were implanted in the brain. I'm afraid my knowledge of vulpine anatomy stops there, but if the wolf's brain is analogous to a human brain, they were planted in the pleasure center and the pain center respectively. Do you remember that report we had some months ago on experimentation with pleasure-pain stimulus?"

He replaced the brain on the table and eased himself onto a convenient stool as Napoleon nodded slowly, awareness growing within him.

"Some scientist had a collie with a radio-controlled pleasure-pain stimulator, and he could train it to do all sorts of things with no more cue than a touch of the transmitter button. And there was a diagram of how it could be planted in the human brain...."

"That's exactly correct, Napoleon. There wasn't a diagram of how it was implanted in the collie—if there had been, I could be one hundred percent sure, instead of ninety-five percent. But this is close enough. That wolf was kept in a cage or pen, or somewhere where he couldn't get as much exercise as he should have—and he got a few fat deposits in his legs, because he was there a while. And while he was there they fed him on commercial—probably canned—dog food. Poor beast. Most dog food has cereal added as

filler and for some of the vitamins. But a wolf in the wild would starve before eating grain.

"And finally, he had this device implanted in his skull. The operation is not an easy one at all, and I should like to meet the surgeon who performed it successfully on at least thirty wolves."

Napoleon considered all the implications of the situation, and went over them very slowly. "Somebody kept these wolves penned, fed them, and made very efficient hunting machines out of them." He looked up. "I smell a rat, Illya—a rat with feathers."

Illya nodded. "Remote-controlled wolves, a false back to the cave, a flying vampire—yes. And I think we will know in a very short time the secrets behind their other little tricks."

Zoltan spoke for the first time. "Do you know who is responsible for these monstrous things?"

"Let's say we are fairly certain. The wolf has no brand on his flank, and there is no maker's mark on the receiver here, but to the trained eye it speaks as loudly as an unsigned Chagall to a student of modern art."

"What bothers me," said Napoleon slowly, "is why they *didn't* kill us. That first night in the forest—or last night, if they weren't ready then. And, most especially, why was the Count driven off by Hanevitch's crucifix trick when your bullets didn't affect him?"

Illya's eyes narrowed. "Yes. Why? I think we may have an interview with *Colonel* Hanevitch before we go home again. I wonder if he knows more about this than he has seen fit to tell...."

* * *

The interview with Hanevitch was postponed in favor of more immediate problems. Even with Napoleon and Hilda helping, the kitchen took a while to clean up. And by the time they had finished, Illya was more cautious.

"On the other hand," he said, "a move at Hanevitch now could tip off the enemy. Better, I think, we should strike directly at their nest."

"By going in through that false-front cave and following the yellow chalk marks back to their source?" asked Napoleon.

"Exactly. Zoltan, did you see any way the rock could be opened from inside the cave?"

"We were in no hurry—I experimented with the operation of the secret entrance for some minutes and solved all its secrets."

"Are you game to come with us on a full-scale invasion tonight?"

"On the condition that we stay close enough together that we do not get separated again."

"I'm coming too," said Hilda. "If this is what I think it is, you'll need everybody who can handle a gun."

Zoltan frowned. "I do not think you should. This is not a proper business for a young lady to be involved with."

"But I am involved! Who is more involved than I am? I found Carl's body; I was almost killed by that vampire—except that he wasn't really, I suppose, but I thought he was at the time. No one has more right than I to be in on the final attack. What about you?" she finished aggressively.

Zoltan drew himself up. "They are using *my* castle and *my* name," he said. "Your life may have been in danger, but my family honor means more to me than my life."

Napoleon looked at Illya. "I feel kind of left out," he said. "I'm just doing it because it's a job. Maybe *we* should stay here and let them go."

Hilda said, "But you were chased by those wolves, and they almost killed you."

Napoleon shrugged. "People try to kill me on just about every assignment I get. You get used to it after a while."

"I don't know whether I ever could."

Zoltan frowned slightly. "You shouldn't have to," he said. "The first time I saw you and knew what you were involved with, I asked myself 'What is a nice girl like her doing in a job like this?'"

"I just knew more about this area and the people than anyone else in the Bucharest office. I was working as a code clerk there two weeks ago, and just about everyone else there grew up in the cities. But I was raised in Orjud, not forty miles from here, over the mountains, and I knew all the legends and the ways of life of these people. So they gave me a provisional promotion to the rank of Technician, and sent me here with *Domn* Endros. And that's all." She looked at Napoleon and Illya. "I'm sorry if you thought I had some training as an agent or something like that, but I'm really not."

"You'll be getting some training tonight if you come with us," Napoleon said. "Can you use a gun with any degree of effectiveness?"

"Oh, yes."

"Have you ever used one on a person?"

"N—no...."

"Then now is no time to start. The first few times are very difficult. You will stand in the background and hold a gun. You can *look* as though you were capable of killing someone, and that'll be all that's necessary. How about you, Zoltan?"

"I am capable, my friend. I have done many things when they have become necessary. I would as soon withhold the details." He glanced at Hilda.

"Good," said Illya. "We don't need them. You two will both have weapons." He looked at his watch. "We will leave the village by car at sunset. Dress

warmly—it will probably snow again tonight."

* * *

Night had filled the woods again when the four shadowy figures slipped into the shallow cave. One finger-filtered flashlight scanned the wall, stopping at a hand-sized indentation in the rock near the back.

Zoltan reached up, then paused and whispered, "Once we are in the tunnels, make no sound. It can carry strangely." The other three nodded, and he threw his weight on the handhold.

In complete silence the back wall of the cave revolved and he slipped into the opening, catching the door halfway open and holding it while the others came through.

When they were past, he released it. The wall slid soundlessly back into its place, and the cave was empty once again.

Chapter 14: "Only When I Am In Costume."

Down the tunnel they crept, Zoltan in the lead. Without hesitation he guided them through the labyrinth for several minutes, turning at intersections where yellow blazes indicated the trail. Their path rose slightly, but without the irregularities Napoleon and Illya had found the night before. At one intersection, Zoltan paused and pointed. "Here," he whispered, "is where we entered the tunnel last night."

They continued, now in totally strange territory. After a good quarter of an hour, Napoleon gradually became aware of noises somewhere ahead—uncertain and indefinite so far, but definitely not natural.

As they continued walking, the sounds became clearer. Some of them were voices, and some were mechanical. They had an odd reverberant quality, carried as they were along the tunnels and corridors for indefinite distances, distorted, echoed and amplified by the baffles of rock they traveled among. But they were closer, and still approaching.

At last Zoltan stopped, and extinguished his light for a moment. As their eyes grew accustomed to the darkness they became aware that they could still distinguish the shadows of those ahead of them, and tell where the corridor walls were. The very faintest of blue glows showed ahead. Zoltan grouped the other three in a close huddle, and address them in the faintest of whispers.

"There's something not far ahead. I think it is a large cave with many people working in it. We will go ahead—Hilda, you wait behind us where you can see what happens."

"Wait a minute," said Napoleon. "I think it's very noble to try to keep Hilda out of this, but if something happens I want my life to depend on the best-qualified person around, rather than the least. Illya?"

"I quite agree. Do you stay, or shall I?"

"I think you should."

"All right. How long do you expect to be gone?"

"Not long. It sounds like there's a fair-sized group out there. I don't intend to tackle more than half a dozen. If it turns out there are more, we can just sneak right out again and radio for reinforcements."

Illya nodded, and Zoltan asked, "Everything arranged?"

"Right," said Napoleon. "We just go far enough to get a good look at what's going on, and then get out again."

Zoltan snapped his light off, and let Napoleon lead the way.

Around the bend to the left, the light grew brighter—and around a bend to the right it continued to increase. Now the texture of the rock surrounding them could be distinguished, and the four figures were all clearly visible to each other. Napoleon stopped short of the next bend and gestured to the others to wait while he went on.

Slowly and cautiously he cocked an eye around the corner of the tunnel, squinting against the brightness of the alien-looking fluorescent lights that hung from the ceiling of the large cavern which opened before his gaze.

The walls were of rough natural stone, but the floor had been smoothed artificially. There were no more than half a dozen men in plain sight, all working around the end of a wide conveyor belt that ran out of the cavern to the right. They seemed to be occupied with loading large crates, unlabeled but of sturdy construction, onto this belt, which carried them away to an unknown destination. Along the walls were stacks and stacks of apparently empty crates of identical design.

The conveyor was being loaded from a diminishing pile of boxes which seemed quite heavy—each took two men to lift it onto the belt. Napoleon could not see any indication of what the weight was, but his first guesses were heavy machinery, or ammunition.

He watched in silence a few more minutes while the last of the boxes rolled off into the darkness, and then was moderately startled when the six men climbed onto the belt and rode off after their burdens. About a minute later the conveyor belt rumbled gently to a stop and he became aware that it had not really been silent after all—there had been the low vibration of the driving motors.

Then he turned and crept back to where the others waited. "There's a cave just around the corner," he whispered, when they had gathered close around him. "There were some men working in it, but they're gone now. I'm going out to have a quick look around. Come as far as the entrance and keep an eye on me."

They followed like shadows, and stopped at the mouth of the tunnel. Once again Napoleon looked out carefully, and when he saw no one he stepped out into the light.

Now he could see that the conveyor belt ran through a hole in the wall next to a flight of steps leading up out of sight, and that it started up parallel to them just within the hole. The surface of the belt was ridged into sections

which apparently folded flat on the bottom but served to lift the load on the ascent. There was another belt, level, which ran into the room and ended a few yards away on his right, where he couldn't have seen it before.

He started towards it, hoping to find an explanation of all this activity in the cave next door. Just then the scrape of a shoe on rock warned him of someone's approach.

He knew he was too far from the tunnel to get back there safely. In a moment he had jumped forward into the darkness of the next room along the conveyor belt. He hugged the wall and listened to the cautiously approaching footsteps.

They stopped some yards away, and there were several seconds of silence. At last a voice said in English, "Come out, Mr. Solo, wherever you are."

Napoleon's stomach froze as he looked quickly around for an escape route. He eased his weight onto his other foot and started to move along the wall with infinite caution.

The voice spoke again. "Mr. Solo, your friends have been taken, but not harmed. We have neither need nor desire to harm any of you. I would much prefer that you come out peacefully, because otherwise I shall have to come in after you and I have no wish to be shot at."

Napoleon thought this was reasonable, and leveled his automatic at the entrance.

After a short wait, the voice continued, with a note of regret, "You're being coy, Mr. Solo. We could leave you in there until hunger brought you out, but we have a schedule to keep. Perhaps this will change your mind. Miss Eclary..."

There was a stifled scream which brought Napoleon a step towards the entrance before he stopped himself.

"I do regret the need for melodramatic methods, Mr. Solo. Please understand you can cause us no more than a temporary inconvenience, and under the circumstances we can afford to be most forgiving. Our work here is nearly done, and when we are through we will be far beyond your reach. You will merely be held prisoners for a few days and then released."

Napoleon strained his eyes against the darkness, but the light from the next cave revealed nothing more than stacks of something around the walls near the conveyor belt. He looked around his own position, and started nervously when he saw what looked like a human body. After a moment he realized it was something made out of metal. Were they constructing robots?

Then the voice came back again, and this time it seemed closer to the mouth of the cavern. It held a distinct note of patient regret. "All right, Mr. Solo—as you wish. We will come in and bring you out."

Napoleon was peering through the gloom at the glow of light from the other room, watching for the first sign of a silhouetted target, when there was a soft *chuff* from around the corner. And then there was a burst of incredible blinding actinic light which seared into his eyeballs even as he threw up his arm to protect his face.

In total blindness, he heard running footsteps and felt his gun wrested away from him before he could move. Then there were two strong arms on either side of him, pinioning his arms and hustling him along. As his sun-blaze-flecked vision began to clear, he heard the same voice again, beside him.

"Sorry; I suppose that was unsporting. But as I said, I don't like being shot at. And this way you were in no danger either."

Behind the purple ball that still floated in his sight, Napoleon could make out a man standing a few feet from him. The man was tall, thin-faced and cheerful. He had a familiar look about him which Napoleon couldn't quite place. Then his mind supplied a funereal pallor, a black cloak, fangs and a fiendish expression....

"Count Stobolzny!"

The man shrugged. "On occasion. I am modestly pleased that you found my performance convincing."

Napoleon scowled and looked around. Zoltan and Hilda were there, each held firmly by uniformed guards in the gray uniforms he had expected—but Illya was not in sight. Had he gotten away after all? If he had, he might be listening.

Zoltan had apparently given up struggling, but his face still showed anger. "You have masqueraded as my ancestor," he spat, "and brought disgrace on my family name. You are nothing more than a common criminal."

The target of this abuse arched one eyebrow. "On the contrary, my dear Count," he said. "I am quite a bit more than a common criminal—in fact, if I may say so, I am rather an uncommon one." He shifted his gaze to Napoleon. "Can it be possible that you have not told them who we are? You must have suspected."

Napoleon thought back. "No," he said finally. "I don't believe I did. Tell them, that is. If I hadn't been certain it was you, I wouldn't have come."

"You really should have given us more warning," said the false Count with mild reproof. "If we had known you were coming, we'd have wired a bomb."

Napoleon turned, as well as the firm grip of his guards allowed, and nodded at his friends as he introduced them. "Hilda Eclary, U.N.C.L.E. Technician from the Bucharest office. Zoltan Dracula-Stobolzny, the *real* Count of that title, whose ancestor you have been doing impressions of. And this is our host," he concluded, addressing the other two, "who also does a less successful imitation of a gentleman, as you see. Do you also do Jimmy Cagney?"

Their host permitted himself a slight smile. "I adopted the role of the *Voivode* Tsepesh because of an accidental physical resemblance and a well-developed sense of humor. My real name is unimportant—you may call me Peter."

"This," said Napoleon to his two fellow prisoners, "is Peter Unimportant, who in real life is apparently something fairly important in an organization known as Thrush."

"Thrush?" Hilda's face paled, but Zoltan looked puzzled.

"An international criminal conspiracy," said Napoleon by way of explanation.

"My, Mr. Solo, you *are* melodramatic," said Peter. "We prefer to think of ourselves as a highly independent organization of consulting technicians."

"Well, could you tell us exactly what you're consulting about right now? I seem to remember it's accepted practice to explain everything to the prisoners before you kill them."

Peter shook his head sadly. "Really, Mr. Solo. I said before that we don't need to kill you—you will simply be held prisoners and released when our work here is through. And we need have no secrets from our guests." He smiled. "Besides, releasing you afterwards will be so much more humiliating."

He raised an arm and touched a large switch-box. Immediately the next cave came ablaze with light.

"Here, my friends, you see the remains of a once-proud treasure trove which would have dazzled your eyes and staggered your imagination." He waved his arm, and they looked.

Now Napoleon could see what had been stacked around the walls of the cave. There were heaps of gold—literally heaps, almost as high as a man and twenty feet across at the base. The gold was formed into ornaments, some jewel-studded, some plain. Religious forms seemed to predominate; statues and crucifixes were most common. One life-sized figure of Christ seemed cast in solid gold.

When he was able to tear his eyes away from the sight, he looked around. There were more statues along the walls, some only of painted wood, some of stone. There were great gem-encrusted books a man would stagger under the weight of, and suits of ancient armor, one of which Napoleon had mistaken for a person in the darkness. There were no suits of full armor—only breast-plates, intricately inlaid and chased, some leg-pieces, shields, short-swords. None of the horde seemed to date from a time more recent than the late Roman period.

At last he looked back at Peter, who nodded. "Impressive, isn't it? When Attila the Hun sacked Europe in the tenth century, his base of operations was here in Rumania. He stripped the churches and palaces of more than half the continent, and carried his loot into what was then considered the far east. Twelve years ago some ancient manuscripts came to the attention of our research department in Paris—manuscripts which referred to Attila's Golden Horde in terms which implied it was his treasure store rather than his army which was referred to.

"Subsequent to that discovery, this area was subjected to an exhaustive search. Other moldering documents were discovered, and analyzed for clues. At last, six months ago, our years of effort were crowned with success. We believe this to be the main store of Attila's treasure, so hidden as to defy the treasure-seekers of the world for a thousand years. And it now comes to swell the treasury of Thrush, who will put the wealth it represents to uses Attila could not have dreamed of."

"A fitting inheritor," said Napoleon coldly. "He'd be proud of you."

The intended insult seemed to pass Peter completely, as he merely nodded complacent acceptance of the statement.

"But you are no better than thieves," said Zoltan. "This treasure is not yours. It belongs to—"

"To whom?" asked Peter sharply. "Half the nations these were stolen from no longer exist. The treasure was on your land, it is true, but your family inhabited it for over five hundred years and never suspected its existence.

We, on the other hand, have spent years of labor and hundreds of thousands of dollars in a scientific search for the treasure—not to mention the cost to our front organization which bought this castle. We have *worked* for the treasure, and now we have it."

"But think of the archeological and historical value," said Hilda suddenly. "This should belong to the world."

Peter smiled slowly, and suddenly he looked like the vampire he had pretended to be. "My dear girl—when we take over the world, it will."

There was no answer for that. Napoleon decided to change the subject. "As long as we are in the midst of explanations, what are you doing with all your loot right now?"

"We are packing it carefully and shipping it out by air to another location—and this is something I'm afraid I cannot reveal to you. But it is carried by our Thrush helicopter, which uses the courtyard of the castle for a landing area. During the day the helicopter is stored away under cover with our Thrush trucks and other vehicles, in an upper level of these caves which we have expanded to suit our purposes."

"Thrush-helicopters and Thrush-trucks? And I suppose you call this your Thrush-cave?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact it has been referred to that way."

Napoleon leaned forward towards Peter, lifted the flap of his coat, and looked intently at his waistband. The guards had their hands on their weapons, but Peter merely glanced down. "What are you doing, Mr. Solo?"

"Looking for your utility belt."

The Thrush scarcely batted an eye. "Oh," he said. "I only wear that when I'm in my bat costume."

And he turned and started towards the stairs, motioning the guards to follow him. Napoleon was seized again and hustled off, followed by a passive Zoltan and a complaining Hilda.

As they started, Napoleon scowled after him. "Five thousand Thrush agents in Europe," he muttered aloud, "and we had to be captured by a wiseacre."

Chapter 15: "My Sense Of Humor Will Be The Death Of Me Yet."

Somehow Napoleon's primary emotion was one of relief. He was captured and Thrush was getting away with a fortune; and he had failed in his assignment to bring the murderer of Carl Endros to justice. But his beliefs had been vindicated—there really *was* a logical, rational explanation behind the whole thing. There were no vampires, no werewolves; only good old Thrush, up to its unusual tricks. And once again Napoleon felt he was on a solid footing with the universe.

Besides, all was not lost. Illya was out there in the darkness somewhere, and rescue would be forthcoming. In fact, the canny Russian had probably taken the suggestion and hurried back outside to call for assistance. A small army could be flown in from Bucharest in the next few hours, and Thrush would not get another ounce of this gold.

Meanwhile, they were being taken up a flight of stone steps. The fluorescent lights overhead were spaced economically, but there was more than sufficient illumination to keep the steps safe.

They climbed what seemed to be several hundred feet but was probably no more than the equivalent of eight or ten stories. As they climbed, their host continued talking.

"I really thought the idea of starting a vampire scare was a bit of inspiration. We needed to keep the local citizenry indoors at night so our flights would remain unobserved, and to keep them away from the castle. They're so terribly superstitious that it was easy. Two lower-echelon workers in another satrap of Thrush were discovered taking advantage of our organization and materials for their own personal profits, and were ordered executed. It was

no less than fitting that their deaths should serve to repay the trouble they had cost. Wasting lives is as foolish and inefficient as wasting anything else that can be made to work for you.

"So we had them killed, dressed them in local working clothes, and drained their blood. Then the bodies were left where they would be found and start rumors. It was really quite simple. We had not counted on the credulity of the authorities—the idea of their believing in these rumors to the extent of actually sending someone to investigate never occurred to me. As I am sure you are aware, the greatest strength a real vampire would have in this modern time would be the fact that no one would believe he existed."

He smiled to himself. "Perhaps we feel a certain amount of kinship. Certainly there are few people outside of high-level circles who really believe Thrush exists. As a result we can accomplish many things which would otherwise be beyond our abilities. Disbelief is the strongest shield anyone can have."

"How much longer does this go on?" asked Napoleon under his breath.

"The stairs or the monologue? A few more minutes. They will end simultaneously, I promise you."

"Good. I came here to be captured, not talked to death."

The Thrush smiled tolerantly. "Bear with me, Mr. Solo. It is seldom we allow a captive to carry information about us to the rest of the world. You three will have that privilege."

"Forgive my curiosity, my friend," said Zoltan, "but why release us? Are we not enemies?"

"That is of no importance. Friends and enemies are alike to Thrush. We have no reason to kill you. When our operation is done here we will be far beyond anyone's reach. This is why we did not kill you before this. Our only goal was to frighten you—to lower your efficiency, keep you running

around in the forests with nothing material to work on while we completed our liberation of the treasure."

He shrugged. "U.N.C.L.E. agents are like wasps—if you kill one, you'll have the whole nest after you."

Napoleon raised his eyes from the floor and saw the end of the stairs ahead. "Your calculations were a little off," he said. "You should have known better than to kill Carl Endros."

Almost on cue, cutting off his last word by a fraction of a second, the howl of a hunting wolf floated eerily between the rock walls.

The Thrush looked back down the stairs and frowned. "Franz," he said to Hilda's guard, "was that ahead of us or behind us?"

"Could not tell, sir," said the guard. "Echoes."

"Klaus can take care of the girl—you look ahead. Don't worry about shooting the damned beast; we've got dozens of them."

Franz snapped a salute and hurried up the stairs and out of sight. During the silence that ensued, Peter said casually, "I had wondered about the security of those pens. I hope no more than one is loose—they have been a great expense to the organization."

There was another pause. Napoleon looked at his two guards, each a couple of inches taller than himself. "I suppose you two are Hans and Fritz?"

One of them permitted himself a flickering expression of surprise, and both looked at Peter. He in turn looked closely at Napoleon. "How did you know that?"

Napoleon covered his surprise with a little shrug and a smug smile. "Oh, after all," he said, "U.N.C.L.E. isn't *entirely* without resources." He looked up the stairs consideringly. "What do you think had happened to your

scout?" He threw a glance out of the corner of his eye at Peter, whose eyes narrowed.

"*Franz*," he called. "Do you find him?"

There was no answer. Peter looked around, and then said, "Come. We cannot stand on the stairs forever. Klaus—Fritz—have your weapons at ready."

They started cautiously up the last few steps. As Napoleon's head came above the level of the floor he looked down the long hall that stretched off into darkness ahead of them. There was a single light at the top of the stairs, and no other.

A moment later the seven of them stood in a little group in a pool of light, surrounded by two stone walls and darkness. Peter was distinctly nervous by this time. "There must have been a power failure," he said. "This light is on the emergency circuit. But with that wolf prowling around somewhere..."

Somewhere ahead of them came a low, menacing growl. Peter looked quickly around, saw the flashlight clipped to Zoltan's belt, and seized it. Its beam flickered around the corridor. A few crates were stacked there, and a few statues. There was nothing living in sight. But the growl sounded again.

Peter spun about, and flashed the light back down the stairs they had just ascended. And as he did so, Hans gave a little sigh as his gun clattered from his limp hand to the floor. With a rustle of uniform and a loose-limbed thump, he fell to join it.

The Thrush leader looked down at his guard, an expression of fear growing in his eyes. Fritz let go of Napoleon and was standing a few feet back, gripping his sidearm tensely and eyeing the U.N.C.L.E. agent suspiciously. Peter looked at him too.

"What have you done, my friend?" he asked in a voice that was edged with danger. "Have you killed him?"

Napoleon radiated innocence. "You were watching me every minute," he said. "I never even looked mean at him."

Klaus knelt beside his fallen comrade and turned him over. "He's not bleeding, sir," he said. "His pulse seems all right." Then he lowered his head as if to look for something. His head kept right on lowering as his body collapsed across the other.

Peter swung the flash up the corridor instantly, where there was still nothing in sight. But out of the distance, echoing down the corridor, came a sound of a gloating evil chuckle that lasted until every head was looking along the pale golden beam of the failing flashlight.

With scarcely a glance at her, Peter took the one from Hilda's belt, thumbed the button, and added its fresher white light to the yellow one. And still nothing unusual could be distinguished.

He looked at Fritz, whose gun wavered uncertainly among the three prisoners. "You take care you do not fall over like your fellows. Walk behind us, and guard carefully." He looked coldly at the U.N.C.L.E. agent. "If this is your doing, you may not be released alive after all," he said. "You and the girl walk in front as we go down the corridor."

They started off, leaving the two bodies in the pool of illumination behind them. As they walked, the spot of light from the flash Peter held danced along the floor in front of them, sweeping back and forth, throwing long swaying shadows, dodging behind piled boxes, swinging over statues.

They were halfway down the corridor when the searching beam ducked behind a crate and stopped as Peter gasped. Huddled in the light was the body of a man in Thrush uniform. Peter reached forward and pulled him out. His head lolled limply; his eyes were closed. It was Franz. As they looked down at him, Fritz sighed deeply and fell over.

Peter whirled around as his pistol hit the stone floor, and his flash glanced out. And again there was nothing. And again that gloating triumphant

chuckle floated out of the distances of the corridor at them. Then finally his nerve broke.

He ran from them down the corridor to the foot of the next flight of stairs and fumbled frantically for something in the wall. Then he yammered, "Alert! Alert! Corridor Twenty-One. There's something wrong down here. It's struck down four guards without a sound. I have the U.N.C.L.E. people here—I think it's a trick of theirs. Send a troop quickly." He waited for an acknowledgment and then put the handset back.

Turning to face Napoleon, Zoltan and Hilda, he once again seemed master of the situation. "There will be a force here in two minutes," he said jerkily. "Let's see if your invisible power can evade *them*."

Napoleon smiled. "Or if *they* can evade *him*. You see, Peter, U.N.C.L.E. is not without its tricks too. Perhaps it would be better if you just surrendered quietly and let us take you away to a nice safe comfortable cell...."

Peter's gun centered on Napoleon's midriff. "No!" he said shrilly. "You will pay for this. You will..."

"*You will die before he does!*" A deep distorted voice echoed out of the tunnel behind them. Napoleon turned and saw, silhouetted against the distant light, a figure which cast a shadow the whole length of the tunnel. It was one of the statues come to life—a figure in Roman armor, short sword raised high and a shield covering its chest. The flashlight beam stabbed down the corridor and picked out the sturdy figure, the blond hair under the crested helmet, the gleaming iron of the sword and buckler.

Peter made an inarticulate noise in his throat and fired blindly at the apparition. The echoes of the shots rumbled away and were drowned in ghastly laughter. "*We can only die once,*" said the voice as the figure took a stride towards them. "*And you have disturbed our rest. Now you must join us*."

The thunder of the automatic shook the walls as Peter emptied the rest of the magazine at the inexorably advancing figure and then fled for the stairs.

Napoleon caught Hilda as she slipped to the floor in a dead faint, and Zoltan stepped forward to meet the figure. He raised an arm and commanded, "I am Zoltan Stobolzny-Dracula. Leave my friends in peace."

The figure lowered its sword and snorted. "Oh, come on, Zoltan," it said. "Don't be melodramatic."

Illya pushed back the legionnaire's helmet that hid most of his blond hair and propped his sword against a case. "Was I really that good?" he asked, looking down at Hilda.

"You laid 'em in the aisles," said Napoleon. "I thought it was you when I heard the imitation wolf-howl. But why did you only use the sleep-darts on the guards?"

"I wanted Peter to sweat a little. I think we owed him some. Besides, I found this set of armor that was just my size, and wondered how I would look in it."

Hilda opened her eyes. Then she opened them even wider than usual. "Illya!" she said. "How on Earth..."

He held up his U.N.C.L.E. Special and pointed to the fat cylinder screwed to the end. "Knock-out darts, and a new design of silencer. If I hadn't felt the hammer fall, I wouldn't have known when I'd fired."

"But he was shooting at you!"

"I had a shield which was good enough to deflect a glancing shot. It wouldn't stop a direct hit, but I expected him to be too frightened to shoot straight. I was almost right," he said, exhibiting a streak of blood along one forearm. "A near miss. Do you happen to have a band-aid?"

Zoltan shook his head. "You go to great lengths for a joke, Illya. I think you put yourself in unnecessary danger."

Illya shrugged. "My sense of humor will be the death of me yet."

Footsteps rattled on the steps above them, and Napoleon asked quickly, "How did you get up here? Can we get out?"

"The lift-conveyor opens out for a ways. It can be climbed. Come on." As they ducked down the corridor and then to the left, Illya said, "I blew out a circuit breaker by shorting one of the light sockets. I had hoped to do something to their power generator system, but apparently it didn't work. In here." He pointed to an area darker than most of the wall. Napoleon put out an exploratory hand and found it to be an opening.

They boosted Hilda through and Zoltan followed her, then Napoleon and Illya.

"Climb fast," the Russian whispered as pounding feet hit the bottom of the stairs and started down the corridor. They pulled themselves up the steps of the steeply slanting belt and hung there, waiting. The footsteps hurried past, and Napoleon hissed, "Keep climbing!"

They did. They climbed in total darkness until their arms ached, but as they climbed Napoleon explained, "This conveyor was being used to hoist the boxes to wherever the helicopter took off from. If we can get there, we'll be right at the heart of the whole operation. Illya, do you feel up to repeating your performance so soon? It'll be a fresh audience."

"I doubt if the second show will get quite the same raves. Remember, I spent five minutes warming him up for my appearance."

"It may help anyway. Hilda, can you hang to one side and let us get past you for our big entrance?"

There was some rearranging in the dark, and Napoleon was thankful for the fact that the belt was only on about a 30° slant rather than vertical. Such maneuvering would have been practically impossible.

Then the belt leveled off and they paused. Illya inched ahead and looked out into the light, then crept back.

"This looks ridiculously easy," he said. "There's a helicopter out there—with huge blades, no doubt so it can fly silently—and only about a dozen men around it. We have carried the day."

"It looks to me," said Zoltan doubtfully, "as though we may have some work still to do."

Illya shook his head, and pulled his transceiver out of the recesses of his helmet. He extended the aerial and spoke softly. "Channel L, please....Hello, there. We are ready—make your drop in the courtyard of the castle. We'll be waiting." The little metal tube whispered an answer, and Illya folded the antenna.

"That's all there is to it," he said. "As soon as I found out Thrush was involved—this morning, while you were lying slugabed, Napoleon—I sent off to Bucharest for a small assault force. When you were captured I radioed and found them just at Pokol, awaiting only specific directions on where to attack. They should be here in fifteen minutes. Thrush does not have an exclusive copyright on the use of helicopters."

Chapter 16: "He's Lying, Of Course."

After a few minutes there were voices out in the courtyard, shouting back and forth to each other:

"No sign of them below—have you seen anything up here?"

"Nothing. How's the power coming?"

"Be restored in another minute. Make sure no lights are where they can be seen—we tried a lot of switches, and some of them might have been left on."

"All lights are covered—go ahead."

There was a few seconds' pause, and then suddenly the conveyor belt began to shake, and lights sprang on ahead of them. And then the belt was

moving.

Napoleon had just time to draw his automatic before he was carried out into the icy night air and dumped unceremoniously on top of Illya, who was already sprawled on snow-dusted stones at the end of the belt. They managed to scramble out of the way before Hilda was catapulted, kicking, to the floor, closely followed by Zoltan, who managed to land on his feet.

Before he landed, however, there was a shout from a guard and a bullet screamed off into space from the stone near them. Napoleon and Illya each grabbed an arm and carried Hilda backwards between them to a place of cover behind the conveyor belt, which had just ground to a stop again. Zoltan leaped to join them a moment later, slugs yapping at his heels.

"They're only being foolish," said Napoleon. "After all, we have them at our mercy."

"Perhaps we should tell them so," said Illya. "Why don't you just stand up and order them to surrender?"

Napoleon declined to answer.

Soon the gunshots stopped from the courtyard except for an occasional slug which spattered off the wall above them. One showered them with particles of metal and stone, but none came close enough to cause any damage.

"They're trying to hold us down," said Illya. "They're probably working their way around us at this moment. I think we had better relocate before they move in, and the property values suddenly go down."

The nearest cover was a pile of crates a good twenty feet away. Napoleon looked at his partner "Feel like being a running target?"

"Not especially, but I prefer it to being a sitting one. Can you give me cover?"

"No trouble." Napoleon stuck his gun hand and sighting eye around the end of the conveyor and fired in the general direction of their sniper. An instant later Illya was off and running, his figure crouched low in the dimness. There was a shout from across the yard, and a spotlight swung towards them. Napoleon smiled and shook his head as he leaned out once again and let off three quick slugs at the light. There was a shattering of glass and the spot was gone. He ducked back and fished out his transceiver.

"Illya? You okay?"

"Just fine. Come on the over when you get a chance—there's a regular warren behind these crates. We can hide out here for hours."

"Sounds like a nice place to wait for our reinforcements. Give us about thirty seconds to get ready, and then put up some covering fire." He closed the transceiver, and crawled over to where Hilda lay up against Zoltan, his arms around her protectively.

"I hate to disturb you when you've just gotten comfortable," he said, "but there's a much nicer place just next door, and this place may be flooded out any moment now."

"What do you mean?" Hilda started to ask as she sat up, but she was interrupted by the scraping of a footstep on the other side of the conveyor. Napoleon sprang to his feet, forgetting the cover, and fired almost point-blank at an unprepared Thrush soldier no more than five feet away. He had three more slugs in three more men before their weapons were ready, his U.N.C.L.E. Special leaping in his fist as fast as he could swing it and pull the trigger.

He ducked down again as a hail of lead shattered the stonework behind where he had been standing. "Don't look now," he said, "but we're being invaded. Get out there and run as if a real vampire were after you. I'll be right behind you, and if you don't move fast you'll be stepped on. *Now move*!"

They moved. Bullets sang around them, but none struck home, and after a few seconds which seemed like five minutes they dropped into a crouch behind the first pile of packing crates.

Hilda looked around nervously. "How safe are we here?"

"Not very," said Napoleon casually. "The boxes are only thin wood and cardboard. All they do is give us more hiding places. If they really wanted to get rid of us enough to use a machine gun, they could stitch the whole area full of holes in a matter of a few seconds, ruining a lot of perfectly good boxes in the process. If they start that, all we can do is lie very close to the ground and cross our fingers. But for the time being..."

A few shots sounded hesitantly from across the courtyard, and slapped through the boxes several feet from them.

Hilda started, but Napoleon shrugged. "Just shooting in the dark," he said. "Trying to keep us nervous. They don't dare come in here after us—we could pick them off from ambush." He dropped the empty clip from his automatic into a pocket and replaced it with a full one. He worked the slide once, and then let the hammer down gently with his thumb.

Out in the courtyard a starter motor whined briefly, and then the roar of an internal-combustion engine filled the night. It coughed, roared again, and then the sound softened to a whisper. Something went *whuffa-whuffa-whuffa-whuffa*, and Illya said, "They've started the helicopter. I was right—it *is* quiet." He snapped his fingers. "There's our vampire—a flying harness slung from the copter. There was always fog, and..."

"Of course," said Napoleon suddenly. "There was always that wind when he showed up—you mentioned it the time you saw him in Hilda's room. I should have recognized it in the forest. Nothing makes a wind like that except a helicopter."

"I think you can be forgiven," said Illya, "under the circumstances."

The sound of the blades speeded up and the soft note of the engine deepened. "They're taking off," said Illya suddenly.

Then they could hear, coming closer, the familiar sound of an unmuffled helicopter. Their transceivers twittered in unison, and Napoleon answered.

"Solo—Kuryakin," cracked the voice. "We are coming in. Are you all right?"

"We are all right," said Napoleon. "But watch out for another copter coming up to meet you. It's probably armed, and dangerous."

"Thank you. We are considered dangerous, too."

"I hope so," said Napoleon, but he had cut off his microphone before he said it. Then he turned to his friends. "Well," he said, "if the sky were clearer, we could see a most exciting aerial battle...."

"Here comes our copter," said Illya. "They're below the cloud cover."

As they watched, the Thrush helicopter climbed gracefully into their field of view and soared away into the sky. The U.N.C.L.E. craft, smaller and wider, sailed over the wall, and then started to climb after them. Lights flickered around the sides of the Thrush copter, and a few seconds later the crackle of machine-gun fire drifted down to the audience below.

The smaller copter shot up and engaged the other in fairly close-range combat. Darkness hid them half the time, but the flashes of gunfire were visible from both. The U.N.C.L.E. helicopter leaped about in the air like a hornet—hovering, darting in and out, diving, side-slipping, and always presenting the narrowest target to its larger, slower enemy.

But the Thrush craft seemed to have the advantage in firepower. There were at least two machine guns firing, the tracers making a flickering V from the belly and tail of the craft with the point dancing around the U.N.C.L.E. copter.

It was a touch and go battle high in the cold mountain night, with the snow clouds pressing low above the peaks, and the resolution of it was to remain a mystery. The Thrush copter suddenly began climbing again, and in half a minute it had been lost to sight in the clouds. The U.N.C.L.E. pilot followed it up, and then he was gone too.

Napoleon brought his gaze reluctantly back to ground level, and rubbed his neck. Then he looked around. "Do you smell something?" he said, to no one in particular.

Hilda lifted her nose and sniffed. "Smoke?" she suggested.

Illya looked sharply down the corridor between crates. "Smoke. They're trying to drive us out by setting fire to the boxes. I think they know they're done for now, and want to take us with them. We'll have to stick it out here as long as we can," he said grimly. "If we break into the open, we'll be shot down."

The fire spread only slowly, but they had to retreat from it. There were only two ways to go—to the wall of the castle or towards the open courtyard. To the wall there would be no escape—in the open there was always a chance.

Then they heard a roaring of motors overhead, and looked up. Three more helicopters swung into sight over the wall, and started to descend. Napoleon whipped out his transceiver and called to them. "Solo here—watch out for Thrush rifleman under cover. We're back here near the fire, so you can shoot everywhere else."

"What are you doing, Solo—lighting a beacon so we can find the place?" asked the voice from the landing party. "We've got radar, after all."

"It was a cold night," said Napoleon. "We're about out of sausages, but we have some marshmallows left if you care to join us for dessert."

The three helicopters settled into the courtyard with a great roaring of wind and thunder of engines. As they sputtered and died, an amplified voice

ordered, "Throw out your guns and surrender. You are covered, surrounded, and outnumbered. Coöperate and you will not be killed."

There was a pause, and Napoleon looked over the top of the crates. One by one, rifles were being pushed out into the open, and joined by men in gray uniforms, with raised hands.

Then there was a whistling in the air, far above them, and they looked up. Out of the clouds a helicopter was falling—out of control, windmilling weakly. It was coming down far too fast, spinning blades holding it back only slightly. The fuselage was turning, nose down. It grew larger and larger, and then flames began to show along its side. It would miss the courtyard, it would miss the castle—then it seemed to swing to one side, and a moment later it disappeared beyond the wall.

There was a second of absolute silence, and then a long tearing crash as it ripped through trees and plowed into the side of the mountain. Then there was a muffled explosion, and a flare of light against the sky as the fuel tanks burst and detonated.

Then every eye was turned skywards again, looking for the victor. After many seconds the other helicopter appeared, motor roaring, and sank swiftly towards the anxious audience. It was small and round—the U.N.C.L.E. helicopter.

As it landed in the midst of the watchers, it could be seen to be riddled with bullet holes through the fuselage. But the pilot leaned out and gave a "thumbs up" sign as he cut the motor.

Just at that moment there was another sound, which was more felt than heard. The ground shook, and the deepest rumble came from beneath their feet. Four seconds later clouds of dust erupted from the door and the mouth of the conveyor tunnel. Illya looked at it, and this time it was Zoltan who spoke first, his voice a whisper of shock.

"They have blown it up," he said, with the sound more of disbelief than of rage or surprise. "They have blown it all up, and collapsed the caves."

Then another figure stepped into the courtyard, hands raised, but with an expression of triumph on his face. It was the Thrush they knew as Peter.

All four then started across the courtyard towards him, but Zoltan reached him first. Before the Count could speak, Peter anticipated him.

"Yes," he said. "It is gone. It is buried under thousands of tons of rock, and you will never recover it. The charges were planted to destroy every trace of our work, but they were ready. And when it became obvious we had been defeated, I detonated them. It should have been ours—no one else will ever profit from it."

And then the U.N.C.L.E. agents were all around them, and handcuffs were being clamped on gray-clad wrists, and Peter was led away with the rest while Zoltan looked around at his castle.

"Is this to be mine again?" he asked. "Now that the pestilence is removed?"

"If you want it," said Napoleon. "You'll have to check with *Colonel* Hanevitch, but I don't think Thrush's claim will be recognized by the local courts."

"But have a check made of the foundations," said Illya practically. "That explosion couldn't have done them any good."

* * *

The following evening, their last in Pokol, they saw Peter for the last time in the inn, which had been established as Operations Command Post pro tem. The Thrush was in handcuffs and under guard when they spoke to him, but he was unhumbled by his condition.

"Just a few questions remain," Napoleon said to him. "I don't intend to stay awake nights worrying if you don't tell me, but I'd like to know just how you controlled those wolves. We've got the radio receiver, but how was it handled?"

"You could figure it out for yourself easily enough," said Peter generously. "The transmitter was in the helicopter, and the entire situation on the ground was monitored by infra-red floodlights and scanners. Each wolf was sensitive to two frequencies—a general one, and a group frequency so we could direct some of them one way and some another."

"What about your own appearance as a vampire?"

"The fangs were simple tooth caps; the cloak was designed to unfold as a bat's wings. The rest was simply acting ability." The Thrush smiled smugly.

"But you were shot at...."

He gave Napoleon a patronizing look. "Surely you've heard of bulletproof vests? There was an element of chance involved—you might have missed my body and hit me in the head, for instance—but you are all good enough shots that I figured I would be safe."

"That first night we came here, Hilda and I were scared silly by something which must have been artificial. What was it?"

"When you picked up the glass, I thought you had discovered us already. There was a subsonic generator in the room, putting out a fourteen-cycle note at about sixty decibels. This frequency causes an instinctive fear reaction. We had not allowed for the vibrations of the table, which almost gave us away when they began to move the glass across the table. Fortunately, I was able to distract you." He looked patiently at Napoleon. "Is there anything else?"

"Why did you have that empty coffin set up down in the family crypt? You couldn't have expected us there."

Peter's eyebrows drew together in a frown. "What coffin? We made use of no coffins...."

"I have a question," said Illya. "Why did you pretend to be driven off by the cross Hanevitch made of silver knives?"

The Thrush shrugged. "I was pretending to be a vampire. If you had realized I wasn't, you would have also realized why I was immune to your bullets, and aimed for a vulnerable spot. Besides, as I told your friend, we had no need to do more than frighten U.N.C.L.E. agents—not kill them."

Illya threw him a sardonic smile of disbelief. "Then why did you kill Carl Endros? For you should know that it was his death that brought us here in the first place."

The Thrush looked down at the floor, and seemed strangely reluctant to answer. At last he said, "Well, we...we didn't kill Carl Endros."

Napoleon looked at Illya, and then at Peter. "You didn't"

"No. In fact, we had every reason not to."

"Yes, but..." Napoleon was unwilling to go on. He and Illya looked at each other for several seconds.

Finally the Russian agent said, "He's lying, of course."

"Of course," echoed Napoleon, doubtfully.

"I wish I was," said Peter, a note of unhappiness creeping into his voice. "I wish I could believe I was lying. In fact, I almost wish we had killed him."

Napoleon looked at him, a slight crease between his eyebrows. "But if you didn't kill him, then who..."

"No, Napoleon," said Illya softly. "Don't even ask. There are things which man was never meant to..."

"Never mind," said Napoleon hastily. "Never mind. We won't even think about it."

"I'd rather not," said the Thrush. "But I can't help thinking about it." He smiled bitterly. "Look," he said, and pulled from the neck of his shirt a little silver crucifix on a chain. "I've worn this ever since I heard about Endros'

body being found. My superiors would drop my rank if they ever found out about it. But I think we bothered someone when we started digging there—someone who had been asleep a long time. Someone who didn't like being awakened. Now maybe he'll go back to sleep."

Illya stared at the Thrush in amazement. "That is quite a performance," he said finally. "Don't worry, there won't be enough evidence to hang Carl's murder on you. A simple denial would be sufficient."

The Thrush nodded. "Then let it go at that, and live happily. I only wish I could."

Illya gestured to the guards, and Peter was taken away.

They pulled their coats on, and started out to the car. Hilda was on the porch, talking intimately with Zoltan, and they just caught her phrase, "... so happy you will be returning to the castle."

But Napoleon tapped her on the elbow, and said, "Come on, you two can drive us out to the field where the helicopters are—the rest of this can be handled by the local agents and Hanevitch. We're getting a plane back to New York."

* * *

Snow was still falling lightly in the cold evening air, and as they came around the corner of *Satul Contru*, the city hall, Hanevitch came hurrying out to meet them, his Tokarev in his hand.

"There was someone at your car just a moment ago," he said urgently. "I saw him from the window upstairs."

But the fresh snow all around the car for many feet was untouched and smooth. Only on the surface of the hood was there any mark—and that looked most deliberate.

Zoltan went forward and looked at it, then without a word he beckoned to Illya and Napoleon.

The thin layer of snow on the cold metal was marked with letters, a few words in Rumanian. "A joke of some sort," said Zoltan coldly. Illya and Napoleon nodded without saying anything.

"*Thank you. I return to my rest*."

There was no signature.

Hanevitch was muttering behind them, "But I *did* see someone—not clearly, but he was here. The snow could not have covered his tracks so soon...."

"Never mind," said Illya. "Whether you did or didn't, you should have nothing more to worry about."

The *Colonel* heaved his shoulders, and holstered his big automatic. Zoltan held the door open for Hilda, as Napoleon and Illya slung their bags in back and joined them, then went around to sit beside her. Doors slammed, the engine started, and Hanevitch stood back from the old black Poboda as Hilda put it in gear and it rolled away down the hill.

He waved after them as they went around the corner onto the main street, then turned up his collar and started back towards his warm office, where so much paperwork had to be done. It was a full-time job just protecting his village against the government and the rest of the world, without having to protect it from vampires too.

He glanced up at the white sky just before closing the door, and smiled. It was still snowing.

THE END

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